

10 July 2008

Mrs K Askew
Principal
North Liverpool Academy
Priory Road
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Merseyside
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Dear Mrs Askew

Academies Initiative: Monitoring visit to North Liverpool Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Jane Austin HMI and Patrick Geraghty HMI to your academy on 8 and 9 July 2008, 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.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the work of the academy, scrutinised documents, met with the principal and other staff, groups of students, and the chair of governors who is a sponsor of the academy. Inspectors observed 24 lessons, an assembly, tutor time and the academy's enrichment activities.

Context

There are 1,111 students on roll at the academy, including 216 in the sixth form. Boys outnumber girls. The academy serves an area that experiences severe social and economic deprivation. Over 40% of students are eligible for free school meals which is around three times the national average. Just over half have learning difficulties and/or disabilities which is more than twice the average, although the proportion with a statement of special educational need is below average. About 5% of students come from minority ethnic heritage.

Approximately, two fifths of current teachers transferred from the predecessor schools as did almost all of the academy's non-teaching staff. Other posts, including senior management positions, have been filled by suitably qualified staff. There is

little difficulty in recruiting staff. The academy is accommodated in one of the predecessor schools until the completion of a new building. Its specialism is business and enterprise.

Achievement and standards

At the end of the academy's first year of operation, GCSE results were well below average on all key measures, and students' achievement was significantly lower than that of their peers nationally. The current Year 11 students have followed the academy's Key Stage 4 curriculum, and validated results for BTEC qualifications show that 69.9% have gained the equivalent of five GCSE passes at grades A* to C. Data provided by the academy indicate that GCSE results will increase this proportion slightly and that the overall outcome on this measure is likely to be well above the national figure. Although expected to remain below the national average, a marked increase is anticipated in the percentage of students gaining five good GCSE passes, including English and mathematics. These outcomes represent good progress for students whose attainment on entry was well below average.

Results of the 2007 Key Stage 3 national tests, taken by students at the end of Year 8, were well below the national averages for students at the end of Year 9. Results are likely to be similar this year and will be close to the academy's targets at the expected Level 5, but not at the higher Level 6. This represents satisfactory progress overall for these learners. Where students are making less than the expected rate of progress, limited literacy skills and well below average attendance are key barriers to success.

The academy sets challenging targets for all students across all subjects. In Key Stage 4 these are particularly demanding since they are based on the expected rate of progress for all students nationally, regardless of social circumstances and learning difficulties. A rigorous assessment and tracking system, much improved in accuracy following extensive staff training, enables underachievement to be identified rapidly. The academy responds vigorously to this in a range of ways, such as extra support for individuals, regrouping of students and curriculum changes. Students are offered varied opportunities to improve their learning, for instance, through revision sessions, residential learning weekends, on-line revision materials and support with coursework.

Outcomes for the small sixth form cohort in 2007 varied across the types and levels of qualifications. At A and AS levels the pass rates were in line with the national average, although the proportions gaining higher grades were low. The small cohort following level 1 courses all gained passes. Pass rates were good at level 2 in most subjects, although they were satisfactory for students repeating GCSE mathematics and poor for those retaking GCSE science. The substantial increase in the number of sixth form students, improved attainment on entry and the wider range of courses offered, all combine to give the academy the potential for improved standards and achievement for post-16 students this year.

Personal development and well-being

The behaviour of students is generally good. They behave sensibly and safely in the playground at break times and lunchtimes. There is some boisterousness when students move between classrooms. In lessons, students were usually well behaved. Most listened well and complied with teachers' instructions. On occasion, some students were distracted from their work, partly because they were not fully challenged by the level and pace of work and partly because inattentiveness was not checked straight away. The number of permanent exclusions is high, and has increased since last year. However, that of fixed-term exclusions has declined.

Students are friendly and keen to talk about aspects of academy life, such as extra-curricular opportunities and the merits and prizes which they can achieve. The academy has created a number of opportunities for them to exercise responsibility. These range from serving on the elected academy parliament and sixth form council to acting as house and games captains, 'acadabuddies', and anti-bullying counsellors. Students also raise funds for charity, often on their own initiative.

Attendance is well below average. Currently, it stands at 88.42% which is a decline on the figure of 89.3% for the academy's first year of operation: this is a serious concern. Authorised absence has declined slightly, but unauthorised absence has risen. A range of useful strategies are employed to improve attendance: senior staff meet with poor attenders on a regular basis; rewards are given for good attendance and academy support workers visit homes. There is close cooperation with both the police and the local authority's (LA) education welfare service to tackle persistent non-attenders. Punctuality remains an issue for the academy. Over the course of the academic year, the punctuality of students has not improved. For example, 53 students arrived late on the second day of the inspection. Too many students also arrive late for classes during the school day.

Quality of provision

Three quarters of the lessons observed were good or better. Little inadequate teaching was seen. Classrooms have very effective displays to promote, support and reflect learning. Challenging and innovative approaches to teaching and learning are central to the academy's strong improvement and motivational culture. For example, the Raising Attainment Project in Years 7 and 8 (RAP) seeks to match work more closely to the needs of students. There is a strong focus on differentiated activities, self-assessment and opportunities to develop literacy skills across the ability range. Independent learning techniques, presentational and group skills are promoted. Lessons are planned to meet individual needs. In most classes, relationships are positive and characterised by mutual respect so that learning takes place in a harmonious and orderly atmosphere. Clear lesson objectives are set and teachers use their subject knowledge to explain topics well. Where teaching is good or better, challenging questioning ensures that students achieve well. Progress in lessons is at its greatest when students are stimulated by a variety of activities that require them to make contributions and think for themselves. For example, in one lesson, groups used 'thinking hats' to produce a mind map on the hypothesis that China is a good place to hold the Olympic Games. Many teachers make good use of varied learning

resources and activities to engage students' interests and encourage participation in lessons.

In the weaker lessons, the pace is slower, activities less varied and questioning is not extensive enough to involve students. These lessons were too teacher-centred and did not promote a culture of independent learning and investigation.

Teachers use the academy's robust assessment and tracking procedures well to monitor the progress of students. There is good and improving use of information and communication technology to promote learning. For example, in several lessons interactive whiteboards were well used to explain concepts, highlight progress and promote pace. Assessment is good and work is regularly monitored. Marking is frequent and consistent, with advice on how students can improve their performance. The teaching and learning of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good. The academy has a strong sense of what is required to elicit further improvement to teaching and learning, and well focused strategies to achieve these objectives have been developed.

The academy's broad, balanced and innovative curriculum is informed by both its specialism and by well tailored responses to students' needs. The imperatives of the Every Child Matters agenda, alongside the academy's five key enterprise capabilities, provide a coherent rationale for the curriculum's design. This is exemplified clearly in the development of the two year Key Stage 3 RAP programme aimed at raising students' literacy levels and their cognitive skills. Pertinent themes are delivered through an integrated approach to literacy and the humanities. Together with the acquisition of key skills, students' personal development is fostered through working in permanent bases with a small, consistent team of staff.

At the end of Year 8, students are carefully guided into one of four Key Stage 4 pathways best suited to their abilities, prior attainment and aspirations. In tune with the academy's specialism, there is a very wide range of vocational courses to select from. Results of this year's BTEC entries indicate a high level of success for students following these. Where appropriate, students follow off-site work-related programmes, while a more traditionally academic route of GCSE courses remains an option for some. The system for tracking students' progress is well used to inform curriculum decisions, and changes are made rapidly when courses prove unsuitable. The academy responds quickly and thoughtfully to meet the needs of its most vulnerable students. Personalised curriculum provision is made, for instance, for students with low and erratic attendance, which capitalises on their strengths and enables as many as possible to leave with some qualifications. Students' personal development is effectively supported through the 'ME' programme in assemblies, tutor time and enrichment weeks.

Provision for sixth-form students is made within the framework of a collaborative formed with two local schools. As a consequence, students can choose from a very wide range of courses and are able to pursue qualifications at levels 1 to 3, including a wide choice of vocational options. The rapid growth of the sixth form indicates that the offer is motivating and meets their needs. The academy's holistic approach to

learning and personal development is reflected in its decision to pilot the international baccalaureate, with a small number of students in the first cohort.

The enrichment programme is a notable feature of the academy's provision, complementing the taught curriculum and building a culture of achievement. Students have weekly opportunities to develop and pursue an extensive array of interests such as jewellery making and calligraphy. Many sporting and musical activities are available, as well as courses that lead to additional qualifications. Regular themed enrichment weeks promote enterprise skills, extend students' cultural experiences and widen their horizons. The academy draws well on links with its many business and community partners to provide exciting activities and opportunities that stimulate students' interest and enjoyment of learning.

The Every Child Matters themes have been fully integrated to augment strong guidance and support for students. Transition and induction arrangements are very well planned. Students settle into academy life quickly. Students' learning and welfare are monitored carefully and there is excellent and speedy help for those who are causing concern or in need of additional support. The academic mentor and house tutor system works well and encompasses the learning, care and guidance needs of students. Tutor sessions are effective and productive; they promote a calm and industrious start to the day. The academy has effective partnerships with all stakeholders and support agencies. The 'house system' makes a good contribution to the academy's ethos and provides a strong example of its aspirational nature. Each 'house' is named after a successful Liverpool writer and is led by a mentor who develops links with parents and supports students at risk of underachievement. Any underachievement is quickly identified and effective support provided. The academy is successful in promoting students' self-belief and a culture of aspiration and challenge. A well-planned assembly programme allows students to reflect on motivational and aspirational objectives and on ideas beyond those of the everyday. For example, one assembly focused on individual students' success and consisted of a series of student presentations on success in sport and creative arts: these were highly appreciated by fellow students and conveyed a strong sense of achievement allied with a strong work ethos. Consistent systems ensure that students have a very good awareness of their starting points in subjects, what they should aspire to and how to improve. The academy makes use of a variety of excellent external partnerships. The welfare and support systems for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and for vulnerable students are excellent. Students and their parents attend review days twice a year at which academic progress and personal development are discussed. Comprehensive careers education is increasing the motivation of students in Years 10 and 11 and encouraging progression to post-16 education.

Leadership and management

The highly effective and resolute leadership of the principal, ably supported by the experienced senior leadership team, has laid firm foundations for the academy and has developed an improving and positive ethos that promotes learning. Together, they have a clear vision for the academy, wanting students not only to achieve and succeed but also to enjoy their education. All members of the senior leadership team

have specific areas of responsibility. Consequently, they have a good shared overview of how the academy is developing. Data and other evidence are well used to inform the team of where underachievement is and of other areas that need to be addressed in order to move the academy forward. Strategies for developing the academy are very carefully considered prior to implementation. Improvements are determinedly and rapidly driven and seen through to fruition. Nevertheless, the academy's leadership is both reflective and flexible and does not hesitate to adapt or drop initiatives if necessary. The academy's self-evaluation of its effectiveness is broadly accurate but its documentation would benefit from being more succinct and evaluative. The academy has good capacity to improve.

A key initial focus for the academy was the development of strategies to improve students' behaviour. Coupled with high expectations of students, these have helped create a learning environment which runs smoothly on a day to day basis. In turn, improvements in behaviour allowed the academy to focus on improving teaching and learning. Expectations of staff in this regard are also high. The senior leadership team leads the quality assurance of the academy's work, including the effective monitoring of teaching and learning. The team's evaluation of the effectiveness of these is broadly accurate. Constructive feedback to staff and a comprehensive programme of training has strengthened teaching skills. Identified weaknesses in teaching have been quickly, robustly and determinedly tackled. The academy has instituted a range of initiatives to share good practice in teaching and improve pedagogy. Job descriptions and performance management arrangements for all staff are in place. Those for teachers, contain an appropriate focus on raising the achievement of specific groups of students.

Middle managers, such as subject and faculty leaders, check the work of students. They have assisted in the introduction of a useful system of informal peer observations, whereby staff can watch colleagues teach. This strategy is designed to develop teaching skills in a supportive manner. However, middle leaders do not, as yet, formally monitor the quality of teaching and learning in their areas. Subject leaders do not have regular and formal opportunities to discuss and share existing good practice. There is scope to develop the roles of middle leaders in order to enable them to have more impact on improving the quality of provision in their areas and to raise standards.

The academy's initial development plans also concentrated on a number of measures designed to successfully bring together students from the two predecessor schools. An example of these was the introduction of the 'house system' which used healthy and friendly competitive activities to interest, engage and unite students. The current development plan is very detailed and is well supported by action plans drawn up by faculty leaders. These also address issues for development which have been identified by the principal in an annual review of each faculty's performance. The academy's business and enterprise specialism is well promoted throughout its work. One example of this is the strong emphasis placed on developing the team-working skills of students which was observed in a number of lessons.

The governing body was set up in 2006. Its membership has a wide range of experience, particularly from the world of business. This expertise in business is appropriately drawn on by senior leaders. The chair of governors shares the

leadership's clear vision for the academy. He is very well informed about the academy's progress and is closely involved in planning for its development. Governors provide a good level of support, but also challenge, to the senior leadership team.

External support

In its early stages, the academy drew on the support of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. Effective links have been developed with local primary schools and with the two secondary schools with which it has formed a sixth form collaborative. It also uses the services of a school improvement partner who acts as an effective 'critical friend' to the academy. Good links exist with the LA's education welfare and curriculum development services. Strong partnerships with the local community have been systematically developed, such as those that exist with neighbourhood and church organisations. Local residents are pleased with the academy's decision not to allow younger students outside its grounds at lunchtimes. In collaboration with one of its sponsors, the academy has plans to develop a wireless 'cloud', which will provide local residents with access to the internet.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards in English and Mathematics in Key Stage 3.
- Improve attendance and the punctuality of students both at the start of the school day and at the start of lessons.
- Develop the roles of middle leaders.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

Yours sincerely

Michael McIlroy
HM Inspector of Schools