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Mr Brendan Loughran
Principal
Darwen Aldridge Community Academy
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Dear Mr Loughran

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Darwen Aldridge Community Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Patrick Geraghty HMI to your academy on 15-16 March 2010, 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 including those relating to safeguarding, and met with the principal, senior staff, the directors of learning for English, mathematics and science, groups of students and an adviser from the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Telephone conversations were held with two representatives of the sponsor, one of whom is a governor.

Context

The academy opened in September 2008, housed in the buildings of the predecessor school. It started a new sixth form at the same time. Most of the staff and students from the predecessor school transferred to the academy. The principal and most of the vice and assistant principals were appointed directly to the academy. The academy is almost fully staffed with specialist teachers and a large team of teaching



assistants and other staff who support students' learning and pastoral care. The academy is due to move into new buildings closer to the centre of town at the start of the next academic year in September 2010.

There are 764 students aged 11 to 18 years on roll, of whom 106 are in the sixth form but with only 14 students in Year 13. An increasing proportion of students are making the academy their first choice of secondary school. There are more boys than girls in Years 7 to 11. Nearly 10% of students are of minority ethnic heritage. Around 24% of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, which is higher than average. Of these, 12 have a statement of special educational needs. The academy serves a community of diverse social and economic characteristics but with several areas of disadvantage; 20% of the students have free school meals, which is above the national average and 75% of sixth-form students receive the education maintenance allowance.

The academy's sponsor is Rod Aldridge OBE, chair of the Aldridge Foundation. The academy's curricular specialisms are entrepreneurship and sport.

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

Students join the academy having attained below average results in national tests at primary school. Many have weak basic skills, particularly in literacy and oracy. Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are below average. Teachers' assessments in 2009 indicated that around 70% of the students reached Level 5, the standard expected of 14-year-olds, in English, mathematics and science. This represents an improvement when compared with the predecessor school's 2008 results, though these had been much lower than in 2007.

There are some clear signs of improvement in Key Stage 4 where the academy's range of courses and qualifications has led to a significant rise to 68% of students gaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE and equivalent qualifications. However, a much lower proportion, 23%, included GCSE English and mathematics. This proportion was lower than the predecessor school's results in 2007 and 2008, and well below the academy's target of 36% and the government's floor target of 30%. The academy receives support through the National Challenge. Of concern is that the academy was slow to realise that its projections were over optimistic and that teachers' assessments were not all well founded. The academy has introduced various strategies to raise standards in these two key subjects this year including the use of early GCSE entry which has led to 19% of the 2010 cohort already attaining grade C in both subjects. However, this again falls short of the estimate provided to governors and is a distance away from the ambitious target for the summer of 38%.

Other areas of improvement include the rises to 94% of students achieving five A* to G passes and 99% gaining at least one qualification. Some pronounced gaps in performance narrowed: in particular, girls had previously outperformed boys and students in receipt of free school meals had achieved far less well than their peers. Nevertheless, the unevenness in the performance of different subjects was reflected



in students' progress which was inadequate in mathematics and for boys in English. Students achieved particularly well in art.

The quality of learning is mostly satisfactory but many students need to make good progress if they are to have the opportunities in the future that the academy desires for them. Students are often passive learners who lack self-confidence, despite the small size of many classes. Too little attention is paid to developing students' basic skills and creating the habits to make students into effective independent learners. Lessons are long and can lose pace unless skilfully designed to sequence and build depth of learning through a variety of interesting activities.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Attendance has risen steadily and is now broadly in line with the national average. Successful strategies to improve it include speedy communication with parents and carers, rigorous follow-up procedures, and schemes to enable students to catch up after absence. Term-on-term figures are recorded and students rewarded for good attendance.

Students speak of how much behaviour has improved, saying there is far less bullying and that it is dealt with quickly when it does occur. No student has been excluded since the academy opened. While behaviour is often good in lessons, some inattention and low-level disruption was observed, mainly where teaching was weaker. Around the academy's site, many students behave well and with consideration for others although there is some boisterousness at times. The improvements to behaviour are supporting better attitudes to learning. The academy's developing ethos was reflected in an assembly, attended by a number of parents, to celebrate the achievements of Year 7 students.

Students enjoy the increased range of extra-curricular activities including various sports and cultural activities such as art, music and drama. Through the specialism, students have undertaken various projects within the community, and they have contributed to local consultations.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching was good and occasionally outstanding in about a quarter of the lessons, satisfactory in three fifths, and inadequate in a small minority. Strengths of the better teaching include teachers' enthusiasm, coupled with high expectations of students' contributions and attainment. The teachers are unafraid to present challenges and ring the changes in approaches to teaching and learning. They use their subject knowledge effectively to sequence learning through interesting and well resourced activities and in asking probing questions, following up students' responses and allowing time for thought and self-correction. Some use interactive whiteboards imaginatively, but no students were observed using them.



In the satisfactory lessons, teachers often dominate the talk or ask closed questions, so that students remain passive with many showing reluctance to participate in discussions. This lack of interaction and opportunities for group and paired work means students' skills in speaking and articulating their reasoning remain underdeveloped. The pace of learning is often pedestrian, occasionally slowing to inadequate, impeded further by students' low-level disruptive behaviour. Planning for lessons, most of which are over two hours long, is not detailed enough or chunked into clear episodes to secure progression and generate pace. Some lessons are elongated three-part lessons, while others comprise disparate areas of the subject rather than developing depth of learning. Few teachers take sufficient account of students' individual needs or nurture their basic skills. The role of additional adults in promoting the learning of students who have special educational needs is not clearly specified and they are not deployed to best effect.

The quality of marking of students' work is inconsistent though there are examples of good practice. Teachers share learning objectives with students, often referring to GCSE grades and National Curriculum levels of the work. Many students are aware of their targets. However, the use of assessment in lessons to promote progression and depth in learning is not well advanced.

The curriculum has been developed to better match students' differing needs. At Key Stage 3, it has been enhanced through the introduction of nurture groups in Years 7 and 8 to support the most vulnerable students. Foundation classes, held in the inclusion centre, are beginning to have an impact on students' literacy and numeracy skills. The academy recognises the need to embed the development of these skills across the curriculum and is developing plans to tackle this. Students in Years 9 to 11 choose from an increasing range of options that span different types of qualification, including some appropriate for the lowest attainers. GCSE law and BTEC science have been introduced and modern foreign languages, technology, and business studies more actively promoted. The curriculum is having a positive impact on the numbers of students attaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE or in equivalent qualifications.

The academy's entrepreneurship specialism is having a positive impact on students' experiences, for instance through the 'opening eyes' projects which promote educational visits. Students working in art and photography are involved in the conversion of a shop in central Darwen into an exhibition and community resource centre. Through very effective securing of entrepreneurship and community funding, nearly £1.5 million, the academy aims to raise aspirations and nurture young entrepreneurs in practical ways. The academy also has a lead role in the Inspiring Communities Programme, which focuses on students aged 11 to 14 years. However, the key entrepreneurship characteristics (creativity, passion, teamwork, risk taking, problem solving and determination) which underpin the academy's central aims are insufficiently evident in day-to-day teaching and learning.



Good links have been established with primary schools to support students' transition to the academy. The 'MOTHS' programme enables the most vulnerable primary pupils to familiarise themselves with the secondary environment. The academy works well with external agencies to ensure appropriate support is available for individual students in Key Stages 3 and 4, including those who are at risk of disaffection or exclusion. The inclusion centre is highly valued by students and acts as a focus for their support. The needs of those students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are identified and the academy tracks their progress against their targets. However, monitoring of the work of teaching assistants lacks attention to its impact on learning.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Over the past eighteen months, the principal has overseen the successful development of the academy's calm and purposeful working environment that sets the scene for teaching and learning. Improvements in behaviour and attendance reflect students' enjoyment of the academy and what it has to offer. The principal is supported by a team of three vice and five assistant principals. They make a promising team, but several lack experience of strategic leadership, though not energy or enthusiasm. The principal and a vice principal have worked with commitment alongside the sponsor to establish important elements of the wider role of the entrepreneurship specialism. The quality of middle level leadership varies in its effectiveness though the drive to raise standards is clear and understood by all. Staff engaged positively in discussions with inspectors, showing a keenness to improve their practice.

The academy's improvement planning lacks strategic clarity. Plans contain a large number of actions, many of which are relevant, but timescales are vague, and success criteria not well defined in terms of the intended impact. Those that focus on raising attainment do not emphasise sufficiently the improvement of teaching and learning. Monitoring and evaluation record the completion of tasks or actions rather than their impact and do not provide the insights that would support more rapid improvement. The academy's self-evaluation is overly positive in places, particularly in judging students' progress and aspects of leadership and management. Senior leaders have devised appropriate systems for monitoring the academy's work and there are common expectations of what activities will take place. However, feedback to teachers is often too positive, in part because not enough emphasis is placed on the most important aspects, for instance, students' learning and progress in lesson observations, and curriculum coverage and depth when scrutinising students' work. Weaknesses identified are not always systematically followed up. The academy has a rather positive view of the quality of teaching, although it has tackled previous inadequate performance appropriately. The criteria staff use as a guide may be leading some to judge satisfactory teaching too readily as good. This could impede the necessary engagement of staff with actions to improve teaching quality.



The academy has developed suitable systems to track students' progress against their targets. Analysis of assessment data is used to group students and identify those who should benefit from intervention strategies. The systems require some refinement as not all targets represent sufficient challenge for individual students. Work on securing accurate assessments across all subjects continues.

Minutes of governors meetings show governors' support for the academy and some challenge. Reports from the principal, which capture the breadth of the academy's work, paint a relatively positive picture. The use of consultants to provide an external view is useful but a more questioning approach to senior staff could help ensure that governors receive the quality of information they require to act as critical friends and hold the academy to account for its performance.

The sixth form

In summer 2010, the sixth form will complete its first cycle of A-level and BTEC courses. The number of students continuing into the sixth form is increasing and is helping reduce the proportion not in education, employment or training. The rationale underpinning the academy's establishment of a sixth form is the potential it offers for raising aspirations and overcoming the traditionally low progression rates to further and higher education within the local area. However, for the academy to be successful the outcomes need to be positive. Results at the end of Year 12 in 2009 were poor with a pass rate at AS of 68%. Results from recent unit examinations were also poor. Systems to monitor and track students' progress are insufficiently robust.

Guidance for students on selecting appropriate courses has been inadequate. Too many students are not suitably equipped academically to study level 3 courses straight away: more than half of those currently in Year 12 have not passed GCSE English and/or mathematics at grade C or above. Although some courses are offered at level 2, take-up is low. Pathways that would promote progression through level 2 to level 3 are insufficiently developed. There is no programme to develop students' independent study skills. In addition, the academy has not assessed students' learning needs to identify where individuals require support.

Students are enjoying life in the sixth form. Relationships are good and students feel confident in their teachers. Teaching in the sixth form was mostly satisfactory. An outstanding lesson was observed in art. Opportunities to share good practice to enhance and develop the skills of level 3 teaching are missed: professional development for staff is not specifically focused on sixth-form provision.

External support

The impact of external support is most noticeable in establishing the academy's specialism although this has a long way to go before its defining characteristics become a hallmark of teaching and learning. The School Improvement Partner also



has the role of National Challenge adviser. Her reports give due recognition to the academy's achievements so far and its focus on raising standards in English and mathematics but could report more sharply on the quality of provision and leadership of those areas. The governors commissioned external consultants to conduct a useful review of the two subjects. There is also a need to ensure that the academy has sufficiently robust mechanisms for evaluating its effectiveness so that it does not become dependent on external views.

The academy has sensibly drawn on the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust in seeking support for the English and mathematics faculties and from the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics in its efforts to appoint an advanced skills teacher in mathematics. Interviews were underway during the inspection.

Main Judgements

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

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards, particularly in English, mathematics and science and in the sixth form.
- Develop students' basic and independent learning skills to equip them for their futures in and beyond the academy
- Adopt a systematic approach to improving the quality of teaching, paying particular attention to:
 - lesson planning that secures progression and meets individual needs
 - the development of students' literacy, oracy and independent study skills
 - assessment strategies that promote learning.
- Improve guidance for students about appropriate sixth-form courses and pathways, refine systems for gauging their progress and establish ways of providing students with relevant additional support.
- Sharpen strategic leadership at all levels to establish an effective cycle of pinpointing priorities, planning for improvement, monitoring rigorously and using the outcomes to drive further improvement.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, Paul Hann, the chair of governors, and the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely



Jane Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
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