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Dr Alan McMurdo
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Dear Dr McMurdo

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Thomas Deacon Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Elaine Taylor, Janet Thompson and Tim Bristow, Her Majesty's Inspectors to your academy on 3 and 4 June, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring visit in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, groups of staff, groups of pupils, representatives of the parents, community and staff focus groups and members of the academy board, including two representative from the sponsors.

Context

Thomas Deacon Academy is sponsored by Perkins Engines and the Deacon's SchoolTrust. It opened in September 2007 following the merger of three predecessor schools; 235 staff transferred from these schools of whom, 201 are still in post.

Thomas Deacon is the largest academy in the programme, with a total of 2139 students on roll including 353 students in the sixth form. Students are admitted according to a fair banding system. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals, from minority ethnic backgrounds and with English as an additional language are all well above average. The number of students with learning difficulties and/or difficulties is broadly average, but the number with a statement of special educational need is above average.

The academy, which specialises in science and mathematics, is organised into six colleges and the sixth form. Within the colleges, students are members of vertically grouped tutor groups for their pastoral care and academic monitoring but access the full curriculum in year groups across the academy. The academy provides extended school provision for students between the hours of 8.00 and 18.00 throughout the year. In addition the academy is a specialist training school.

Achievement and standards

Students' attainment on entry to the academy at Year 7 is currently just below the national average. However, the ability of students entering Year 11 in 2007 when the academy opened was below average, and the ability of those entering Year 10 was also well below average. This was due to historic underachievement during their Key Stage 3 education in predecessor schools.

Overall, the standards reached by students at GCSE in 2008 were above average, but below average in English and well below in mathematics. Likewise, overall progress was outstanding, very good in English but inadequate in mathematics. The academy had entered a number of students into a mathematics GCSE examination, which was not counted in individual students scores, despite the fact the course equipped them well for their subsequent sixth form courses. Outcomes in mathematics, including these results meant that attainment was just below average, and progress was satisfactory. Most groups made similar progress, but the academy recognises that a group of students with learning difficulties and disabilities did not make sufficient progress in the academy's first year. Both the standards reached, and the progress made by sixth form students in 2008 were broadly average.

Standards of current students in both Year 11 and Year 13 are predicted by the academy to rise this year. Standards at Year 11 are rising in mathematics and maintained in English which represents an acceleration of progress. However, although the academy tracks individual student progress, there insufficient analysis and collation of information to demonstrate either the standards or progress of different groups of students.

The academy sets aspirational targets relating to attainment, and in 2008 these were largely exceeded.

Personal development and well-being

The Academy has successfully created a cooperative and supportive ethos that has helped the vast majority of students make good progress in their personal development. This is a credit to the staff and students of the academy who have moved from three different secondary schools and a range of primary schools. Relationships between staff and students are strong. Students comment that they feel valued at the academy and it is clear their views are acted upon. An impressive and extensive range of extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities greatly increase the students' enjoyment and helps students achieve good spiritual, moral,

social and cultural development. By establishing a shared expectation of behaviour in lessons staff have successfully created positive and purposeful learning environments. There are a minority of students who do not find it easy to rise to the high expectations for cooperative and positive behaviour. Withdrawals from lessons and exclusions from school although reducing are still high.

Students appreciate the environment and treat it with respect. The building design helps the relaxed atmosphere particularly at lesson change times where pupils behave responsibly. Attendance is higher than average and the small proportion of students with low attendance is reducing. Participation in additional activities at the academy is high and includes pupils with a range of different interests, needs and backgrounds. The sports college has developed a flexible offer of opportunities which has encouraged a wide range of pupils to become involved in healthy pastimes.

Quality of provision

Teachers clearly demonstrate a determination to improve the quality of their teaching. In consequence, teaching and learning has improved since the academy opened so that nearly all lessons are characterised by good behaviour and productive relationships between adults and students. There is a strong ethos of mutual respect that is evident in the lessons observed. Students demonstrate good team work, skills and cooperation. Regular monitoring and evaluation has led to some successful examples of consistent practise, for example, the use of learning objectives at the start of each lesson. However, procedures have not been rigorous enough to lead to consistent improvements in some important aspects of teaching and learning such as the use of assessment to inform learning within lessons.

Procedures for assessing students are now established and are used successfully to monitor individual progress and to give extra help to those who need it. This information is not yet being sufficiently exploited by teachers to inform their planning so that work is pitched at the correct level for all groups. Consequently, they do not make the progress that they could. In the best lessons teachers skilfully use questioning to enable students to develop their understanding. This is inconsistent and in too many lessons questioning is superficial and lacks challenge and purpose. In satisfactory lessons the range of teaching techniques to enable all students to engage in the lesson is too narrow. For example, opportunities for shared talk are missed where students can demonstrate their learning and rehearse responses to questions.

Marking in some subjects such as information and communication technology (ICT) is helpful and constructive. This is not the case in others where it does not give students sufficient advice on the next steps they need to take to improve their work. One of the results of this is that insufficient attention has been paid to the presentation of students' work which, is generally of a low standard.

The curriculum is broad and balanced and has a number of strengths. Students follow a flexible curriculum in years 7 and 8 that has led to the introduction of new and innovative schemes of work in several subject areas. The three year programmes in Key Stage 4 allow the individual needs of students to be met with increasing success. The impact of this improving curriculum is most evident in the positive attitudes of the students, their increased enjoyment and improved behaviour. A particular feature is the use made of the subject specialisms to support and encourage cross-curricular projects and approaches. Vocational courses are offered through links with partner institutions and increasingly through in-house provision. Students have a wide range of qualifications available to them including some in sports and in leadership. There is good alternative provision for those students with additional needs. The academy has started to tackle the low uptake in modern languages. Physical resources are very good and include an outside science area with a pond and good sports facilities. This adds to the excitement and enjoyment of the students and their pride in the academy. Provision for ICT is excellent and the virtual learning environment strongly supports all members of the academy community. A weaker aspect of the curriculum is the provision for personal and social education. This is well resourced but the delivery during the daily tutor time is of variable quality.

A good range of support structures have been created within the academy and positive progress has been made in improving behaviour and attendance for the majority of students as a result. Similarly achievement support programmes, and language support for students at an early stage of speaking English are becoming well established. Students speak well of the guidance they are given to choose particular pathways leading to future employment or training. The first year figures were very positive for leavers entering employment, education or training. The academy has plans to follow up success in placements to determine effectiveness of the chosen pathways for leavers. The pastoral system based within the colleges is successful in gathering information about individual students including progress in attitudes to learning and attendance. Tutors have a key role in making sure this information is used to identify additional support. There are good examples of individual needs being addressed by offering support from a range of professionals and personalised curriculum packages leading to improvements in progress and attitude. There are some groups of students for whom the interventions are not having such a positive effect. The individual and class group information is not analysed across the academy in a way that helps to identify patterns. There is no overarching view of the effectiveness of interventions for particular groups of students. The recent work to develop a map of additional provision available for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is a good first step towards better evaluation. Safeguarding procedures and protocols meet requirements and are monitored effectively.

The sixth form's effectiveness is good overall. Students' personal development is good. They make a mature and valuable contribution to the whole-school community and have responsible attitudes to learning. Their attendance is above average and

they speak highly of the personal support they receive. Standards are rising and a significant majority continue into higher education. All students studying for the International Baccalaureate successfully completed the courses as did those taking applied courses. An increasing number of students go on to further studies in the academy's specialism, mathematics and science.

The teaching and learning are good and there are improving facilities to allow for private study. The academy offers a broad range of subjects that build on the pathways in Key Stage 4. An extensive range of extra-curricular learning opportunities is available, and well supported. These include a significant number that feature an element of service to others.

Leadership and management of the sixth form are good. Performance is carefully monitored and evaluated. Development planning is thorough and the leadership team works well together to ensure coherent approaches across the colleges. The overall success of the sixth form is reflected in the growing number of applications each year.

Leadership and management

The academy is a busy, but calm and orderly environment. There is a tangible sense of belonging and purpose throughout the whole of the extended day. This highly successful outcome to the merger of the three predecessor schools, each with a quite different culture and characteristics, is the result of the strong, clear-sighted, strategic leadership of the principal, with the support of his senior team. Prior to opening the Principal consulted future staff, students and the wider community before drawing up the academy's agreed code of conduct, demonstrating his commitment to working with stakeholders. Their foresight in working with 'Human Utopia' meant that the many barriers to establishing a cohesive community were overcome with remarkable speed. The fact that the academy is now oversubscribed demonstrates that senior leaders have not only won the respect of staff and students, but also of the wider community.

Leadership is well-designed, with posts of responsibility distributed through the college structure. Self evaluation procedures are in place. Provision and individual student progress are monitored and there is evidence of some effective monitoring and evaluation. However, there is too little evaluation of outcomes or analysis of data by year groups or specific groups of students to inform future action. As a result there is both too little consistency in practice and too low an expectation for this to be addressed between colleges and throughout the academy.

Performance management is effective and is valued by staff. An effective programme of continuing professional development has been provided for all groups of staff, based on the summary of individual training plans. However as staff are given autonomy over their choice of training, certain key aspects of effective teaching and learning, or curriculum provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have not been sufficiently addressed.

The academy has made sure policies are in place, but has yet to evaluate the impact of some policies, for example the equalities policies and schemes. The academy's work with a range of partners, including parents adds to the it's good capacity to improve. Operational leadership through the directors reflects the sponsors' and academy board's aspiration for a business approach to leadership. The human resources manager and the finance manager are positioned as directors and significantly enhance senior leadership. Specific quantitative and qualitative performance indicators have been applied to all aspects of the academy's work. These effectively define expectations to enable the board to hold the academy closely to account, but the principal is aware that these need rationalising in order to be appropriate in an educational setting.

External support

The academy has very good support from the school improvement partner and from the Department for Children Schools and Families. There has also been some good support from the local authority, for example with regard to English as an additional language and to literacy support but some other local authority support has been less helpful.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Further develop the use of assessment data to meet the learning needs of different groups of students
- Accelerate the progress of all groups of students by improving the quality of teaching and learning, including the effectiveness of day-to-day assessment.
- Improve the effectiveness of self-evaluation by using monitoring information to evaluate provision and create consistency throughout the academy

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State [*same person at Academies Group as in cc. list below*], the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the DCSF. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Heather Weston
Her Majesty's Inspector