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16 June 2011

Paul Watson
Principal
St George's Academy
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Dear Mr Watson

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of St George's Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Nada Trikic HMI to your academy on 14 June 2011, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was a first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with you and your senior leaders, a group of middle leaders, three groups of students and the Chair of the Governing Board.

Context

St George's Academy opened in January 2010 following the joining together of St George's College of Technology, The Aveland High School and Cotelands High School. Prior to this, both high schools were National Challenge schools. The academy currently operates on three sites several miles apart; plans are underway to close one of these sites in 2012. A major building programme has commenced on the other two school sites. The academy is much larger than average, with 2390 students including 425 in the sixth form. It shares some sixth form provision with another local school. Most students come from the town of Sleaford and its surrounding areas, where the level of deprivation is lower than that found nationally. It is close to two single-sex, selective grammar schools which attract a significant

percentage of higher ability students each year. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals and those from minority ethnic backgrounds is below the national average. The vast majority of students are White British. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, including a statement of special educational need, is above the national average. Student mobility is lower than average. The vast majority of staff from the three predecessor schools transferred to the academy. Since opening, a vice-principal has taken over responsibility for leading the Ruskington site. A new governing board was formed in September 2010. The academy specialises in mathematics and computing.

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

The academy inherited a history of underachievement from two of the predecessor schools, where attainment was consistently well below national averages. The majority of students join in Year 7 with attainment that is just below the national average. In its first year, the academy has made an immediate impact on raising achievement. Teacher assessments show that, in 2010, a higher than average proportion of students met or exceeded national expectations by the end Key Stage 3 in English and mathematics. Results are predicted to improve further this year.

In Key Stage 4, almost 90% of students attained five or more C grades or equivalent in GCSE and vocational courses. The percentage of students attaining five GCSEs including English and mathematics also increased significantly, but remained below the national average and below the target of 50% which the academy set itself. Notably, the percentage of Year 11 students attaining five or more GCSEs including English and mathematics improved dramatically on the Ruskington site. Fewer students attained at least a C grade in English than in its specialism of mathematics, girls attained much better than boys and very few students attained A* and A grades. Results achieved so far this year and current monitoring data suggest that the ambitious target of more than half of Year 11 students achieving five GCSEs including English and mathematics should be met.

The combination of better teaching, tailoring the curriculum to suit individual students' needs, and carefully targeted interventions to ensure that those students capable of attaining at least a C grade do so, is adding significant value to the progress made by students. However, inspectors noted that teachers do not always plan tasks suited to students' different abilities, so more-able students are not sufficiently challenged and less-able students find some work too hard. When this happens, they become passive and their progress slows. Also, at times, students become too dependent on teachers because they are given too few opportunities to learn by themselves or in small groups.

In the sixth form, students join with standards that are broadly average but with relative few having attained the highest levels from Key Stage 4. In 2010, pass rates in Year 13 were in line with the national average but with wide variation across

courses. In Year 12, the pass rate was below average as some students chose to leave to seek employment and training. Not all students made the progress expected because they were not prepared well enough for the demands of advanced level courses and lacked the confidence and skills necessary for independent learning. This year, leaders have taken steps to improve the quality of guidance for students to help them to select suitable courses. Early indications from module results show that standards are beginning to rise.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students told inspectors that they feel safe and, in particular, talked positively about the improved behaviour and attitudes of students on the Ruskington site. Behaviour is generally good and exclusion rates are low. Incidents of minor bullying are rare but a few students feel that staff could respond much more quickly when it arises. Most students engage in regular exercise and eat healthily. Attendance rates in all key stages are similar to national averages.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors agree with the academy's view that the overall quality of teaching has improved but noted some weaker aspects in lessons which suggest it is not as consistent or effective as it could be. The majority of teaching seen was satisfactory, with some that was judged to be good. Lessons have a clear structure and learning objectives are routinely shared with students. In the best lessons, time is taken to share learning outcomes with students and revisit them part-way through the lessons to gauge their progress and to identify any points for improvement. This was evident in a Year 8 English lesson, for example, where students developed their understanding of homelessness through role play, and explored ways to instil a sense of empathy for their chosen character.

The wide range of academic and vocational courses offered to students is contributing directly to raising achievement. Leaders have worked hard to ensure that students on all three sites have equal access to courses and enrichment opportunities. Periodic innovative learning and immersion days challenge students to work in different ways linked to cross-curricular themes. These approaches are not embedded in day-to-day teaching and learning. Recent changes in English and mathematics, including early entry to GCSE examinations, are being used effectively to boost grades and to provide challenge for those students choosing to study in the sixth form.

The sixth form curriculum provides a wide range of advanced and vocational courses, and includes some Level 1 courses to meet the needs and interests of students. There are good opportunities for students to access specialist courses in the partner school. Lessons are characterised by positive relationships and a willingness by students to work collaboratively. In the best lessons, students are

challenged to apply their subject knowledge and are given ample opportunities to discuss and consolidate learning. In satisfactory lessons, teachers tend to be over-directive and provide too few opportunities for students to take initiative and research their own learning, which leads to some over-dependence on teachers. Students are positive about their experiences at the academy and the support they receive. Opportunities to contribute to peer mentoring and the school council are readily taken, but students across the joint sixth form feel the need for a stronger identity and increased communication between students and teachers to support its development.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Throughout the transition from three schools into one academy, the Principal has kept staff focused on raising students' achievement and has ensured that morale remains high by providing clear, coherent and visionary leadership. The academy's roll has increased, standards have risen and students and staff are integrating well. The Principal is ably supported by an effective team of senior leaders who demonstrate good capacity to drive further improvements. Self-evaluation is thorough and largely accurate, although the quality of teaching is too variable to be judged consistently good or better. Detailed action plans include challenging targets that are regularly monitored. As the academy consolidates, subject leadership arrangements remain complex: core subjects have separate leaders on each site and some foundation subjects are managed by a sole leader. Student progress managers complement the monitoring done by teachers and senior leaders by regularly evaluating how well students are doing and liaising with parents and carers when additional support is needed.

Senior leaders and the governing board have conducted a review of the sixth form in order to identify priorities and tackle some underperformance. There are plans to appoint a manager in September 2011 supported by a team of mentors to provide greater coordination and lead improvements. The experienced governing board has played a key role in determining the strategic direction of the academy and continues to provide weekly support and challenge for the Principal. All safeguarding requirements are in place.

External support

The academy values the support provided by its School Improvement Partner and other external consultants who have contributed effectively to the improvements made so far. Similarly, its co-sponsors, the local authority and the University of Lincoln, provide effective strategic support.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Achieve greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning in all key stages by:
 - balancing teachers' input to lessons with regular opportunities for students to learn independently by themselves and in small groups
 - planning tasks suited to students' different abilities, so that the most able are sufficiently challenged to attain the highest grades and the less able remain fully engaged in learning.

- Establishing effective and coherent leadership of the sixth form by:
 - clarifying the roles and responsibilities of new and existing staff in the sixth form
 - coordinating overall provision and increasing communication within and between the academy and its partner school
 - monitoring the effectiveness of these arrangements to inform development planning and secure further improvements to students' achievement.

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

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector