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21 January 2011

Ms S Carr
Principal
Skinners' Kent Academy
Blackhurst Lane
Tunbridge Wells
TN2 4PY

Dear Ms Carr

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Skinners' Kent Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 19 and 20 January 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 18 lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, representatives of the governing body, senior and middle leaders, groups of students, the academy school improvement partner and the educational welfare officer.

Context

This mixed 11–16 academy opened in September 2009 and replaced Tunbridge Wells High School. It serves an area where most other schools are selective. With 297 students on roll, the academy is smaller than average. Most students are from White British backgrounds with approximately 12.5% from minority ethnic groups. The percentage of students whose first language is not English is low. There is a higher than average percentage of girls. The number of students eligible for free school meals is above average. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average but reducing. The academy has dual

specialist status in science and engineering. There are plans to offer sixth form provision in the future.

Funding for new buildings has been approved by the Secretary of State for Education with work planned to start this spring. The Skinners' Company and The Skinners' School are lead sponsors of the academy with Kent County Council and K College contributing as co-sponsors. The Skinners' Company is responsible for four other schools, one of which is independent. The academy works in close partnership with The Skinners' School, a selective school in Tunbridge Wells.

During the academy's first year there was a substantial turn over of staff particularly in core subjects. However, a settled team of staff now work together well. Some senior and middle leaders are relatively new to their posts but they have established themselves quickly.

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

Students enter the academy with low levels of attainment but most are making at least good progress and an increasing number are making outstanding progress. While some performance indicators for attainment remain below the national average, the gaps are being closed. The percentage of students achieving five higher-grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics, was 17% in the predecessor school in 2009. In 2010, this increased to 31%. Observations of lessons and the academy's own assessment data show that students are on track to achieve challenging targets in 2011. There is no significant variation in the performance of different groups. Students taking up free school meals are the highest performing group overall, exceeding the national average capped points score. Students whose first language is not English also perform well in relation to their peers. Outcomes for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are more mixed but overall they make good progress. The academy's refined tracking systems enable detailed analyses of student outcomes that lead to appropriate interventions.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students' engagement with learning has improved considerably as a result of teaching, care and support that are increasingly matched to their needs. The students spoken to were unanimous in acknowledging the improvements that have been made. They commented on the commitment of staff, their own pride in the academy's achievements and their growing belief that they can succeed. Their aspirations are rising and their attitudes have been transformed. Disaffection is being replaced with confidence, responsible behaviour and a deepening allegiance to the academy. Students feel safe and valued.

Students' future economic well-being is supported by the much better outcomes in English and mathematics and improved attendance. In addition, intervention

programmes to boost basic skills, enterprise days, good opportunities for work experience and one-to-one discussions with gap year learning mentors enhance workplace skills. The academy has worked hard to reduce a high level of persistent absence and attendance is now broadly average.

The effectiveness of provision

The improvement of teaching and learning is at the heart of the academy's priorities. The systems for monitoring their effectiveness are robust and the academy is aware there is some variation in the quality of teaching. While more teachers are using assessment information to plan lessons that challenge and extend students appropriately, information about students' prior attainment is not used well in all subject areas. Learning activities are sometimes too teacher-led and methods do not always encourage students to try things out for themselves. The quality of marking and verbal feedback varies, particularly in pinpointing how students could improve their work. Some teaching assistants are very skilful in supporting students' learning in lessons but this expertise has not yet been fully shared.

In the most effective lessons, teachers have high expectations that require students to think for themselves and take responsibility for their learning. These teachers use their good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in students' learning to plan and deliver lessons that challenge and engage them. They have good subject knowledge and evaluate learning throughout the lessons, tackling gaps and misconceptions skilfully. Success criteria are clear and shared with students who are encouraged and supported in using these to assess their own and others' work. Formative marking identifies the next learning step for students and relates to longer term subject-specific targets for improvement. These strengths in teaching and learning are beginning to be shared. Quite rightly, the academy wants to accelerate the process through, for example, the use of peer observations.

The curriculum has been under constant review. The academy has been creative in establishing a balance between protecting the continuity of students' experiences and initiating new developments. In Key Stage 3, the Middle Years International Baccalaureate has been introduced successfully. This will eventually progress through to Key Stage 4. A wider range of visits, clubs and activities is increasing participation rates and making an important contribution to students' enjoyment of academy life. The academy has good plans to promote its specialism in science and engineering: implementation is at an early stage but more advanced in science.

Provision for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is carefully tailored to the needs of individuals. The academy is developing strong links with other agencies that enhance outcomes for these students.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The strong direction provided by the Principal has resulted in a shared vision and commitment to making things better for students and being a positive force within the wider community. The academy has established itself as an inclusive community. Diversity and individuality are valued and discrimination is not tolerated. Senior leaders work together cohesively. They are tenaciously and effectively focused on improving outcomes for students. Middle leaders are developing their capacity to assure the quality of their teams' work and drive improvement autonomously. At their most effective, they have an accurate view of teaching and learning across their subject areas and are instrumental in improving practice and raising students' attainment. Clear arrangements for line management and well-targeted support underpin the accountability of leaders at all levels; teamwork is becoming a strength. Systems for monitoring and evaluation, particularly in relation to students' attendance and progress, and the quality of teaching and learning are rigorous. Governors are involved in evaluating the academy's comprehensive improvement plan. They are very committed, ambitious for students and developing their understanding of the academy's context. The support and challenge they provide to senior leaders is strengthening. Safeguarding procedures, including those for child protection, meet all current requirements.

Partnerships with other agencies and providers are clearly focused on improving outcomes for students and links with the wider community, and are increasingly productive. For example, in partnership with the local authority the academy is developing extended services provision. Currently, there is a breakfast club and plans for an after-school club. The academy is forging strong links with local primary schools through hosting regular meetings with primary headteachers and involving primary pupils in academy learning days and sports tournaments.

Commitment to high quality continuous professional development is central to improvement plans. Middle leaders have undertaken the 'Specialist schools and academies trust' (SSAT) middle leader programme. Regular opportunities for professional development for all staff are aligned to strategic priorities but also tailored to the needs of individuals. Systems for performance management challenge staff to improve practice and raise their expectations of students.

Working together, the academy's leaders demonstrate good capacity for improvement. They have secured strong foundations and are building on these with determination and vision. Success is evident in positive student attitudes, rising standards and effective management systems.

External support

The academy has worked in close partnership with the sponsors. Other support comes from the local authority, the SSAT, the academy's school improvement partner and a range of consultants. Effective targeting and co-ordination on the part

of the academy's senior leaders ensures that support contributes to the high quality of professional development opportunities and students' rising attainment.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Continue to raise students' attainment by sharing the growing strengths in teaching and learning systematically, especially:
 - the effective use assessment information to plan and deliver lessons that challenge students appropriately and accelerate their progress
 - strategies for developing students' independence and capacity to take responsibility for their learning
 - providing students with regular, precise verbal and written feedback that explains how they can improve their work.
- Ensure that teaching assistants are equally skilled in supporting students' learning in lessons.

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

Jacqueline White

Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Andrew Boggis, Chair of the Governing Body
The Academies Group, DfE [Paul.hann@education.gsi.gov.uk]