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Mr John Hallworth
Executive Headteacher
Castle View School
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Dear Mr Hallworth

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Castle View School

Introduction

Following my visit with John Paddick, Additional Inspector, to your school on 18 May 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI) to confirm the inspection findings.

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

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, the head of school, the principal designate of the academy, two governors, groups of senior and middle managers, groups of students, the national challenge advisor and representatives of the local authority (LA)

Context

Castle View School is smaller than most secondary schools. It is situated in an area of social and economic disadvantage. Most students live in the immediate area and almost all are of White British heritage. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is higher than average. A higher than average proportion of students are identified as having learning difficulties and /or disabilities, although the proportion with a statement of their special educational need is in-line with the national average.

The school is due to close in August 2009, with the academy opening in a new building on the same site in September 2009. Building works have caused significant disruption to the school. Part of the school has been demolished leading to a reduction in facilities and the subsequent move of some departments into alternative accommodation. Outside space has been significantly reduced and the noise from building work is a constant disruption to many lessons. The academy principal was appointed in October 2007 and took up her post in April 2008.

The substantive headteacher left the school in August 2008 and the LA successfully brokered the appointment of an experienced headteacher to oversee the school's last three terms. He spends half of the week in school. A substantive deputy headteacher is acting head of school. He manages the school on a day-to-day basis. Staffing is relatively stable. A deputy headteacher has left the school and five teachers are on temporary contracts. Student numbers are stable and all students will transfer into the academy.

Achievement and standards

Students' attainment on entry to the school is generally below average particularly in speaking and listening. This affects their work in English and their ability to access work in other subjects. Students make generally satisfactory progress by the end of their time in school although some do not progress as well as they should during Key Stage 3. This is because some teachers do not have a secure enough understanding of their starting points and do not build sufficiently well on their existing skills and abilities. Students make better progress during Key Stage 4 but standards in most subjects remain below average.

In 2008, the school did not reach its targets at Key Stage 3 and standards remained below average. An analysis of students' current work shows that in English mathematics and science, standards remain below average. However, over the past three years there has been a small but steady upward trend in standards at the end of Key Stage 4. In 2008, the school exceeded its target for the proportion of students attaining five A* - C passes although the proportion of students attaining this benchmark remained below average. The school did not meet its target for the proportion of students attaining five good grades including English and mathematics. As a result, the school was identified as a National Challenge School and became eligible for additional funding and support.

Students' progress has accelerated this year because the school has employed a number of carefully considered strategies to improve attainment at Key Stage 4. All Year 11 students were entered early for English Language examinations and over a third of students attained A* - C grades. Students at risk of leaving school without qualifications were entered for GCSE in mathematics and they all gained a qualification. The school has strengthened its procedures to assess students and track the progress they make. It uses the data gained to tackle any underachievement. The school has an accurate view of the attainment of groups and

individuals and this together with the outcomes of modular examinations already received confirms the school's view that attainment is set to rise this year, particularly in English and mathematics. The specialism is beginning to make a positive impact on students learning and attainment and it is enhancing their enjoyment of school.

Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive effective support. Those with weak literacy skills generally make good progress with reading and writing but oral skills remain weak.

Personal development and well-being

The personal development and well-being of students is satisfactory and there are some strengths. Most students behave well. They have positive attitudes, take care of books and resources and move around the building sensibly. They have adapted to the restrictions imposed by the reduction of space and facilities well because they know that these short term difficulties will lead to better facilities in the future. Students have generally positive relationships with their peers and with teachers and other adults and they are happy to talk to visitors, providing thoughtful and mature responses to questions.

Student groups such as the student council, peer mentors and the 'enterprise warriors' make a very positive contribution to school life. These groups are well established and influential. The school has prepared students for these roles and they carry them out thoughtfully. The 'peer mentors', for example, do not simply provide friendship they also provide a 'listening ear' and access to practical support. The students who undertake this role know when to refer students to staff and how to deal with safeguarding or confidential matters.

Unfortunately, although most students are a credit to themselves, their families and the school a very small proportion of students do not behave as well. They engage in low level disruption during lessons and demand a great deal of time and attention. Students are concerned about this but point out that things are improving. They say that behaviour is getting better because of the effectiveness of the refreshed code of conduct. They feel that there is very little bullying but that when it does occur, it is managed promptly and to their satisfaction. Exclusions have declined significantly this year but despite the best efforts of the school attendance has been harder to shift. Fewer students are persistent non-attenders but overall attendance has not improved significantly and remains below the national average.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall although there is some good teaching which helps students to learn very effectively. In the best lessons, the pace of learning is brisk and carefully structured to ensure that all students make progress. Students work in pairs or small groups and have ample opportunities to improve

their thinking and oral skills. Teacher talk is used sparingly and students are given well targeted guidance which helps them to improve. In these lessons behaviour is exemplary and students listen attentively when asked to do so. In lessons which are not as effective, work is not well matched to the needs of individuals or the class as a whole. Some tasks are dull or undemanding and do not build sufficiently well on students' previous skills and knowledge. Some lessons are dominated by the most confident or vociferous students because teachers do not ensure that all students have opportunities to respond.

Expectations of what students might achieve, particularly in Key Stage 3, are too variable both within departments and across the school. Some teachers make their expectations clear to students and, as a result, work is of a good standard. However, this is not always the case. Some books belonging to the youngest students show a marked deterioration in the presentation and organisation of work as the year goes on and some of the most able students are praised fulsomely, and sometimes inappropriately, for their efforts but are not helped to develop the new skills which would allow them to attain their predicted levels. In science and mathematics, some teachers insist on accurate presentation of work and annotations which show how answers were arrived at. In other lessons, work is badly presented and students develop habits which are destined to lose them marks in formal examinations.

The curriculum is satisfactory. There is a good range of extra curricular activities and residential visits including a skiing trip. To their credit, staff have maintained these activities during this difficult final year. The curriculum at Key Stage 4 has been adapted very successfully. Some new courses have been introduced, extra teaching groups have been established and there is a renewed range of 'booster' classes and catch-up activities. There is a good range of vocational courses and opportunities for work-based learning. Students in Years 10 and 11 benefited from a very good system of guided choice for their option subjects. This ensured that the subjects they chose to study were matched well to their abilities and future aspirations. Year 9 students, transferring into the academy in September are less clear about their options for next year and this is causing them some anxiety.

Students are well cared for and supported. All safeguarding requirements are fully embedded into the school's work and reviewed regularly. Health and safety is well managed and risk assessments are in order and have a suitably high profile in the school's work. There is a particularly strong and effective system for supporting students who are at risk of disaffection or exclusion. Students receive good personal and moral guidance and academic guidance is improving and is now very effective at Key Stage 4.

Leadership and management

Despite facing significant challenges the school has made progress since its last inspection and exhibits a clear sense of energy, drive and enthusiasm. The leadership of the executive headteacher is good. He has a clear strategic vision for

the school and a determination to bring about improvement. He has identified the most important priorities, tackled significant weaknesses and built on existing strengths. He works effectively with the LA and National Challenge Advisor and has brokered a good quantity of support for the school. This support has been used effectively in those areas where it will have most impact. Despite only being in school for part of the week, he is highly visible and accessible to students. They know him well and respond positively to him. His skilled leadership has ensured that staff are supported through periods of uncertainty and unavoidable tension. As a result, staff absence has declined despite increased demands in school and additional meetings connected with planning for the academy.

Middle leaders have received a good range of professional development and support and are firmly focused on improving teaching and learning. School improvement planning, through the raising achievement plan (RAP), is effective. The pace of change has been brisk but individual staff have not been over-burdened. School self-evaluation is accurate and the school makes good use of data to bring about further improvement. The executive headteacher is clear that there is still much to be done but the improvements made this year are providing clear evidence, to students and staff, of what can be achieved.

The school is managed well on a day-to-day basis. The refreshed behaviour code and 'on call' system are helping to promote positive behaviour. Senior staff have managed difficulties caused by the extensive building work very well and have minimised the disruption to school life. Governors are well informed and give a great deal of time and energy to the school. They are supporting the school's closure and the move to the academy very effectively.

The principal designate has done much to ensure that the school is not destabilised during its final months. This has helped the school retain almost a full complement of senior leaders and other staff. The school has facilitated meetings and has released key staff when requested to do so. However, the academy does not always communicate its needs effectively or promptly enough. The appointment process has taken a great deal of time and is just reaching a conclusion. This has affected the release of some data to the academy. As a result, some plans are not as well developed as might have been expected. There is still much to be done if the academy is to make the best possible start in September, not least in improving communication between the academy and the school.

External support

The school has been very effectively supported by the local authority and by the National Challenge Advisor. The good quantity and quality of the support available has helped staff at all levels make progress and focus on bringing about improvement.

Main Judgements

Plans for the development of the academy are not as well advanced as they need to be. This is largely because of the time needed to complete the appointments process.

The school has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that all staff have consistently high expectations for students' work.
- Further improve teaching and learning, particularly at Key Stage 3.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Director of Children's Services for Sunderland and the Academies Group at the DCSF.

Yours sincerely

Christine Graham
Her Majesty's Inspector