

17 January 2014

Mrs Alison Jobling
Principal
The Blyth Academy
Chase Farm Drive
Blyth
Northumberland
NE24 4JP

Dear Mrs Jobling

Monitoring inspection visit to The Blyth Academy, Blyth, Northumberland

Following my visit to your academy with Tom Grieveson SHMI on 16 January 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave us and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with the principal and with other senior leaders. In addition, inspectors met with subject leaders and with a group of teaching staff, and also with members of the governing body. Inspectors talked with students throughout the day, in lessons and around the academy and met with a small group of students from Key Stage 3. Managers from the academy joined inspectors throughout the day in visiting lessons to see teaching and look at students' work and their attitudes to learning.

Context

The predecessor school, Blyth Community College, became The Blyth Academy on 1 October 2013. Since that time, five members of staff have resigned. The academy has forged useful links with various partners, including Whitley Bay High School and St Mary's Catholic School in Newcastle. These links are providing good support for leadership and teaching at the academy.

Main findings

Significant strides are being taken to improve the academy. Following the monitoring inspection to the predecessor school in September 2013, senior leaders have worked hard to establish higher expectations and clarity of purpose across all aspects of the academy's work. There is now a greater sense of coherence and teamwork, driven by the collective responsibility to 'get things right'. Across the academy, key actions have been taken which are securing the foundations for further improvement. For example, underpinned by a focus on raised expectations – expressed as a set of 'non-negotiables' which make clear that only 'good' is good enough – there are now increased levels of accountability for improvements to teaching and to students' achievement and behaviour. Greater confidence in the quality of assessment information is helping to target underachievement and identify where prompt action is needed. A focus on the contribution of leaders at all levels has strengthened the capacity for further improvement. Through a more rigorous approach to performance management, the proportion of 'good' teaching is rising steadily, supported by training increasingly tailored to the needs of staff. Leaders ensure that the evaluation of teaching takes account of a good range of evidence, including impact over the longer term. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of teaching that is less than 'good' remains and academy leaders recognise that reducing this proportion further is a key challenge. The newly-formed governing body has quickly grasped the importance of the issues facing the academy, and is demonstrating growing confidence in holding leaders sharply to account for rapid improvement.

Students also recognise the impact of recent changes. They say that movement around the academy is calmer and more orderly and disruptions to learning, although still an issue in a few lessons, are much less prevalent. They say most teachers are 'strict but fair' and that they are much clearer now about the consequences of poor behaviour. Most students are now taking greater pride in themselves, their work and their academy. As a result of a focus on the consequences of the use of discriminatory language, including homophobic language, students are much more aware of the impact of this form of negative behaviour. However, as leaders recognise, there is more to be done to further develop students' more positive engagement with learning. Although overall attendance remains below average, it is improving and the proportion of students who are persistently absent from school has declined compared to the same period in the previous year.

Improvements in the ways in which additional funding, including the pupil premium, is targeted are helping to close the gaps in achievement between different groups of students. The academy knows more clearly which actions are having the most impact because it is now more rigorous in its evaluation of the impact of this funding. However, academy leaders recognise that more needs to be done to improve students' literacy skills. For example, the quality and presentation of students' written work continues to vary considerably, and a systematic approach to tackling these weaknesses is yet to become fully established. As a result of a review of the provision for students with special educational needs, teaching assistants and other support staff now work more closely with students who require additional support. Although rates of progress are rising for all groups of students, overall standards remain low and academy leaders rightly recognise that they must continue to pursue a relentless focus on raising students' achievement, given the gaps in students' learning that have built up over time.

As a result of this visit, inspectors recommend that the academy should:

- Eradicate any remaining instances of low-level disruption to learning
- ensure that all middle leaders are making a positive contribution to improvement
- continue the drive to improve attendance and punctuality
- develop and implement an academy-wide approach to improving students' literacy skills
- secure strong appointments to remaining staff vacancies
- continue to ensure there is a relentless focus on increasing the proportion of good and outstanding teaching.

HMI will visit the academy again in the summer term 2014 in order to evaluate the impact of the actions taken by academy leaders and governors to bring about further improvement.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body.

Yours sincerely

Lee Northern

Her Majesty's Inspector