

Serco Inspections
Boundary House
2 Wythall Green
Lane
Birmingham
B47

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0121 683 2033
Direct F 0121 683 2020
ann.morris@ofsted.gov.uk

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Ms Ann Palmer
Principal
City of London Academy – Islington
Prebend Street
Islington
London
N1 8PQ

Dear Ms Palmer

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to City of London Academy - Islington

Introduction

Following my visit with Asyia Kazmi HMI to your academy on 13-14 January 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

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

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, groups of pupils, a range of staff, and the chair and vice-chair of governors who also represented the sponsors.

Context

City of London Academy – Islington is sponsored by the City of London Corporation and City University London. It opened in September 2008 in the premises previously occupied by its predecessor school. The first stage of a building programme is due for completion in April 2010 and the final stage by September 2011. The site will be shared with a local special school for students with physical disability. The academy is planning to extend to post-16 provision from September 2010. The academy's specialist subjects are business and enterprise. The principal took up the posts of principal designate in February 2008 and of principal in September 2008.

There are currently 764 students on roll and most students in Years 9 to 11 came from the predecessor school. There are almost twice as many boys as girls. The proportions of students eligible for free school meals, from minority ethnic groups, with home languages other than English and with special educational needs and/or disabilities, are high. A high number of students join or leave the academy other than at the usual times. Staffing is now stable and the academy is fully staffed. Approximately half the staff transferred from the predecessor school.

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

Students' attainment improved in 2009 with 39% of the cohort gaining five or more GCSEs, including English and mathematics, at A* to C grades. Attainment was higher in mathematics than in English. The academy did not reach its challenging target and standards remain well below average. However, given that students' attainment on entry was well below average, particularly in literacy, achievement was satisfactory. There was no significant difference in achievement between boys and girls, or between ethnic groups. More able students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities achieved less well than others. The academy's data on current students indicate a further rise in standards, including in English, as a result of continuing improvements in teaching.

Students enjoy learning and, in the majority of lessons, they now make good progress towards challenging targets, including those for the specialist subjects. In these good lessons students apply independent learning skills such as investigation, problem solving, research, decision making, negotiation and presentation. In a science lesson, for example, students enjoyed the challenge of investigating in groups the factors affecting different types of energy and presenting their findings and formulae. In drama, dance and business and enterprise lessons they helped each other to improve by evaluating their performances and business presentations. In the minority of lessons progress is satisfactory rather than good. This is because students have limited opportunities to apply independent learning skills, and more able students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities are insufficiently challenged and supported to progress at their own pace and level.

Other relevant student outcomes

Students say they enjoy school and this is confirmed by their positive attitudes to learning and their improving attendance. Due to the academy's robust and extensive range of strategies, attendance has improved significantly from a very low starting point and is now close to the national average. Behaviour is satisfactory overall and older students say it has improved. It is good in most lessons but in lessons that do not engage and challenge them, some students cause low level disruption which means that learning time is wasted on behaviour management. Around the restricted school site, behaviour is sometimes boisterous and students are not always

considerate of others. They generally respond well to sanctions as they value their teachers and the support they give. Students say they feel safe and that they can turn to staff if they have any concerns. They also say that any bullying is addressed well by staff and older students.

Students are well aware of the need for healthy lifestyles and appreciate the healthy eating options in the dining hall and the extra-curricular opportunities for sport. They make a good contribution to the community, for example as junior sports leaders. Skills to support their future economic well-being are developing satisfactorily overall. While good leadership skills are being developed through the many opportunities provided for business and enterprise, such as managing their own bank, skills in numeracy and in particular literacy, remain a weakness.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching is good in the majority of lessons. Good features include a clear sequence of tasks that leads the students to appropriately challenging learning objectives and provides opportunities to develop independent learning skills. Good use of probing questions extends students' understanding and engages them in evaluating and improving their own work. A few outstanding lessons were seen. Here the pace of learning is brisk because teachers model the learning expected and check through frequent feedback that all students are making rapid progress. Characteristics of the minority of lessons that are satisfactory include insufficient use of assessment and the students' targets to match the level of work to their needs. As there are too few opportunities to apply independent learning skills, the whole class works at the same pace. This is often too slow for many students and they lose interest.

The curriculum is good and has been extended and tailored well to meet the needs of the students. In Key Stage 3, an integrated curriculum is successfully supporting the transition from primary to secondary school for students in Years 7 and 8. While targeted support is helping to develop literacy and numeracy skills, business and enterprise lessons are developing good skills in financial literacy. GCSE equivalent qualifications in subjects such as information and communication technology (ICT) and performing arts, together with early entry to GCSE, are motivating students in Year 9. In Key Stage 4, the addition of a variety of vocational courses ensures all students have access to suitable career pathways. The impact of specialist subjects is evident not only in the discrete subjects but also in a range of activities. These include running the school shop and the school bank and setting up and managing real businesses such as the school juice bar. Through these opportunities students develop good organisational and leadership skills.

The academy takes good care of its students and liaises well with a wide range of external services to support them and their families. It provides effective guidance and support, for example in improving attendance and behaviour. The recent

appointments of an inclusion manager and specialist teacher are beginning to improve provision for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities through more accurate identification of needs and targeting of support.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leadership and management are good overall. The principal and governing body are outstanding in embedding ambition and driving improvement. As a result, staff morale is high, teachers are committed to raising attainment, and standards have improved. Through accurate self-evaluation, leaders and managers at all levels know the academy's strengths and areas for development, and identify relevant priorities in development plans. Senior and middle leaders and managers are developing good skills in implementing and sustaining improvements. For example, rigorous monitoring and evaluation of students' progress towards challenging targets identifies underachieving groups. Effective intervention programmes are helping to address the underachievement. While monitoring and evaluation of teaching are leading to improvement, they are insufficiently focused on the impact of teaching on students' progress to bring about a rapid rise in this area. Of the 22 lessons observed by inspectors, many were observed jointly with a member of the senior leadership team and all were compared with the academy's evaluation of lessons. While the majority of judgements matched those of inspectors very closely, a minority were over-generous. Nonetheless, given the robust systems which are now in place, the effective self-evaluation and implementation of plans for the development of the academy, together with the extensive range of external support and track record of improvement, the capacity to improve is outstanding.

All safeguarding procedures, including those relating to staff recruitment and checks, meet requirements. Policies are understood and implemented by all staff. The building programme is managed well and students are closely supervised by staff.

External support

The range and impact of external support is outstanding. For example, links with City University, including mentoring by undergraduates, visits and visiting speakers, together with high level business links provided by the City of London Corporation, are raising teachers' expectations and students' aspirations for higher education and employment. Support from the local authority is making a significant contribution to the inclusion of all students. The wide ranging support provided by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust is helping to raise standards, for example through developing systems for monitoring progress and attendance and through the provision of lead practitioners in numeracy and dance. The School Improvement Partner identifies relevant priorities for improvement. In addition, the principal draws on expertise in a large network of schools and other providers, for instance in the provision of vocational courses.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise attainment by:
 - improving teachers' use of assessment and targets to match lessons to the needs of all students, particularly more able students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities
 - developing students' literacy skills across the curriculum
 - ensuring monitoring and evaluation of lessons by all leaders and managers are focused on students' progress.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sue Frater
Her Majesty's Inspector