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1 March 2013

Mrs D Murphy
Principal
The Ferns Primary Academy
Plodder Lane
Bolton
Lancashire
BL4 0DA

Dear Mrs Murphy

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Ferns Primary Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Stephen Isherwood, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 27-28 February 2013, 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 monitoring inspection carried out in connection with no formal designation procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out because the academy's predecessor school was judged to be a school causing concern.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, senior leaders, teachers, members of the school council, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body, the Chief Executive of Northern Education Trust, and a representative of Bolton local authority. Inspectors observed fourteen lessons, covering all year groups. Six of these observations were conducted jointly with senior leaders. Inspectors heard children read, watched an assembly and looked at pupils' work books.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the academy is making reasonable progress in raising standards for all pupils.

Context

The Ferns Primary Academy opened on 1 September 2012 and is sponsored by Northern Education Trust. It is larger than the average-sized primary academy, with 340 pupils on roll. Around half of the pupils are known to be eligible for the pupil premium, which is additional funding provided by the government to support pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and those who are looked after by the local authority, and the children of

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military personnel. Around one quarter of the pupils are from minority ethnic groups, of which the largest is Pakistani. One fifth of the pupils speak English as an additional language, a figure that is well above average. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs supported at school action is much higher than average, while the proportion supported at school action plus or with statements of special educational needs is similar to the national figure.

The academy is led by an experienced Principal who is an associate member of the Trust and has been seconded from a school in the north east of England. She is supported by a vice-principal who joined the academy when it opened. Around half the teaching staff have joined the academy or its predecessor school in the last twelve months. A new governing body has been constituted.

Plans have been approved by the local authority and governors to improve and modernise the academy premises.

In response to parental consultation, a breakfast-club has been opened that is managed by the academy.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

Children enter the academy from starting points that are much lower than those that are typically found. They make good progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage as a result of effective teaching that builds their confidence in a variety of skills. The comprehensive and well-presented learning journals maintained by Reception teachers indicate in detail the strong progress that children make. Pupils are making much better progress throughout the academy than was the case in the predecessor school. Standards in mathematics and English remain below average, especially for middle-attaining pupils, but the gap between the attainment of pupils at the academy and that found nationally is narrowing as a result of strong teaching, a vibrant curriculum and effective support for pupils who are underachieving. Teachers are working hard to compensate for pupils' past underachievement by identifying gaps in their skills and knowledge and planning lessons to rectify these.

Senior leaders and teachers have a clear understanding of their pupils' skills and knowledge. They track pupils' progress rigorously and analyse areas for improvement well at individual pupil and whole-class level. Pupils' progress in mathematics has been accelerated by teaching that provides a greater range of opportunities for their numerical skills to be used and applied in practical contexts. Their progress in reading has been enhanced through the systematic fast-paced daily teaching of sounds and letters, together with plenty of opportunities for pupils to enjoy a rich variety of texts. Pupils' achievement in writing has risen because skills are now taught systematically and pupils are encouraged to write for real purposes and audiences. Attention is focused on developing pupils' skills in sentence construction, spelling and punctuation in ways that interest them. Throughout the academy,

eye-catching displays celebrate pupils' achievements and 'working walls' are continuously developed to help pupils understand the topics they are studying.

The quality of teaching

Pupil councillors feel strongly that academy is improving because 'lessons are much better and more fun.' Staffing has been stabilised and pupils are benefiting from skilled, supportive teachers having consistently high expectations of standards of work and behaviour. Good relationships between teachers and pupils are evident throughout the academy, characterised by mutual respect and a shared enthusiasm for learning.

Teachers work very hard to plan lessons that engage and interest pupils. They make increasingly effective use of digital technology to capture pupils' interest, for example in a mathematics lesson where pupils tried hard to win a game of 'co-ordinates bingo' that demanded a high degree of concentration. Teaching assistants make a valuable contribution to pupils' learning by working with groups to deepen their understanding and sort out misconceptions. Staff have agreed a set of core principles that inform their teaching. They plan effectively to meet the needs of individual pupils and continually assess how well pupils are learning.

Marking is of a consistently good quality and gives pupils clear steps as to how they should improve their work. Pupils are increasingly adept at evaluating their own progress, including through reference to their own mathematics passports, reading and writing targets which provide appropriate challenge. Pupils' books indicate that their work-rate is much better than it was in previous years. Their work is well-presented and they pay attention to making corrections and responding to their teachers' comments. Pupils are keen to complete the tasks set for them but are not yet confident in working out for themselves how they should approach problems without help. Teachers are trying to foster pupils' independence, such as in a highly effective mathematics lesson in which pupils identified incorrectly-positioned numbers within a Carroll diagram and explained their thinking. Teachers provide pupils with good opportunities to work co-operatively, including by talking through possible answers to questions with partners during thinking time.

Teachers share ideas and plan together. There have been few opportunities as yet for them to observe each other's practice or to research teaching approaches in other academies/schools.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils comment that behaviour has improved significantly, 'because we want to learn and we respect each other.' During lessons, pupils are calm, courteous and co-operative. They readily give supportive feedback to their peers and celebrate each other's success. A consistent approach to promoting good behaviour has been adopted throughout the academy, with clearly understood rules, rewards and sanctions. Pupils are proud of having 'green' days. They relish praise and willingly take responsibility, for instance as school

councillors and as reporters for the lively and informative academy magazine. Year 6 'big ferns' enjoy being buddies to 'little ferns' in Reception class. They set a high standard for younger pupils to aspire to, as was powerfully shown in a thought-provoking assembly which was designed and presented by Year 6 pupils. There are very few incidents of poor behaviour and pupils have confidence that nothing will upset their learning.

Attendance is improving but remains below average, principally due to families taking extended holidays. The academy is working very hard to improve attendance and pupils fully understand its importance. Academy leaders have made expectations of good attendance clear to families and they work hard to provide assistance when individual circumstances make it difficult for children to get to the academy on time. Pastoral care is a major strength of the academy. The learning mentor complements the work of teachers, works effectively with families and provides counselling for pupils who need additional support.

The quality of leadership and management of the academy

The Principal provides dynamic, determined and ambitious leadership. She maintains wholeheartedly that only the best is good enough for pupils in the academy and she works creatively to overcome barriers to learning. With the effective support of the vice-principal and other senior leaders, she has quickly established a clear vision for the academy's development and has secured the commitment of staff and pupils. There is palpable evidence of team work and concerted energy throughout the academy. Staff have put the difficulties of the past behind them and stepped up to the mark. Well-judged management systems have been developed rapidly. Communication and decision-making processes are clear so that everyone understands their roles and accountabilities. A rigorous performance management system has been introduced. Procedures for identifying children's special educational needs, consulting appropriately with parents and co-ordinating support have been developed.

The heads of mathematics, English and assessment have identified clear priorities, drawn up rigorous action plans and taken staff with them in their work to drive up standards and ensure that new developments are understood and properly implemented. Parents are welcomed into the academy and there is good attendance at workshops and assemblies.

Leaders continually check on the quality of the academy's work. Regular observations of lessons, reviews of pupils' books and analyses of pupils' achievement mean that there is a shared and accurate view of performance.

The curriculum has been reviewed and overhauled so that pupils enjoy learning in a range of subjects. Learning is enhanced by visitors to the academy and visits out of academy by the pupils. Basic skills are effectively promoted in imaginative ways. Year 6 are enthusiastic about writing letters to their pen friends in Durham and eagerly anticipate meeting them in the summer term.

Governors are knowledgeable about the academy's performance and have a realistic view of the challenges it faces. They bring a range of skills and expertise to the academy, hold leaders to account and provide valuable support. They fulfil their statutory responsibilities, including with regard to safeguarding. The Vice-Chair of the Governing Body is the headteacher of the nearby high school. He and the Principal are working hard together to develop smooth transition for pupils so that their learning continues seamlessly as they move from the academy into secondary education.

External support

The academy's sponsor, the Northern Education Trust has provided highly effective support in steering the transition from the predecessor school to the new academy by securing new leaders who have had immediate, positive impact. The Trust has ensured that the governing body has the appropriate experience and skills to fulfil its role effectively. The Chief Executive works closely with the academy's Principal to ensure that the Trust's values are translated into effective practice at all levels so that pupils' learning is accelerated.

Collaborative working with Bolton Council has ensured that the academy remains firmly within the local family of schools. A local authority adviser provides regular support to the academy and the sponsors commissioned a review of teaching that was undertaken by the local authority. Subject leaders' professional development is supported well through local networks. Leaders and teachers from Harper Green High School work in partnership with the academy to develop teaching and provide additional opportunities for pupils to use specialist facilities.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that the progress of middle-ability pupils accelerates across the academy so that attainment rises to be in line with the national average.
- Improve teaching further by providing pupils with opportunities to make decisions about how they should learn.
- Maintain the focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning, including by enabling teachers to observe and discuss each other's practice and also investigate good practice beyond the academy.

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

Yours sincerely

Mrs Shirley Gornall
Her Majesty's Inspector

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