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20 November 2014

Mrs Philomena Marshall
Executive Principal
Excelsior Academy
Denton Road
Newcastle-upon-Tyne
NE15 6AF

Dear Mrs Marshall

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Excelsior Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 19 November 2014, 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 accordance with the no formal designation procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out because the Chief Inspector was concerned about absence and persistent absence rates at the academy in 2013.

Evidence

Inspectors considered evidence including:

- observations of students' behaviour throughout the day, including their attitudes to learning in lessons
- documentary evidence
- interviews with students, school leaders and staff.

Having evaluated all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers have taken effective action to maintain the high standards of behaviour and attitudes identified at the school's previous inspection. This is because of the relentless focus on raising students' aspirations of what they can achieve, coupled with effective systems and strong pastoral support in place for managing students' behaviour and meeting their individual needs. In addition, senior leaders, governors and the sponsor continuously reflect on the practice in the academy and look outward to learn from best practice elsewhere, to drive improvement in all aspects of the academy's work.

Context

Excelsior is a larger-than-average sized academy with a significantly higher-than-average proportion of students who are known to be eligible for free school meals. Increasing proportions, around two fifths of the students, are from minority ethnic heritages, which is above that found nationally. The proportion of students identified as being disabled or with special educational needs is higher than average. The proportion of students who leave or come to the academy at times other than the start of Year 7 is high. Since the previous inspection, the academy has developed on-site primary-aged provision. Excelsior Academy now provides for students aged from 4 to 18 and includes a primary school, three secondary schools and a sixth-form college.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students demonstrate positive attitudes towards their work, their peers and the staff. Their behaviour in all areas of the academy is good. Students were seen to chat to each other in lessons, breaks and lunchtimes in a respectful and friendly way. They walk around the corridors and open spaces in a safe and thoughtful manner. Relationships between staff and pupils are good and the vast majority of students to whom Her Majesty's Inspector spoke were positive about their teachers and their learning. They demonstrate a keen sense of matters pertaining to their safety. Sixth form students who have attended the academy since it opened are very positive about the ongoing improvements in the academy and the behaviour and attitudes of younger students.

Students come to lessons promptly and well prepared for their learning. High expectations of dress code and lesson preparedness are evident from the start of the day to the end. Students come to the academy early during 'meet and greet' time, when teaching and welfare staff welcome them and keep a close eye on their dress and demeanour.

Students and staff spoken to report that students' attitudes to learning are usually good and staff have a consistent approach to celebrating good behaviour through merits, and challenging any misbehaviour through the academy's 'stepped' approach to sanctions. Students report that the behaviour systems in each part of the academy are understood well and considered to be fair. There are differences in the systems of rewards and sanctions across the various schools. A few students reported that when they attend a different school for a lesson, then it is confusing at times as to what level of sanction is being applied and why.

Occasionally, in lessons, behaviour for learning is not good. Students do not misbehave, but adopt a stance of compliance and apathy. In these lessons staff do not ensure that students are motivated to focus on their learning well enough. Leaders have recognised this, and, following an external strategic review of the academy's performance, are working with staff and students to sharpen the focus on behaviour for learning in order to facilitate more challenging lessons that engage students fully.

Some students report that lessons are occasionally disrupted by low-level misbehaviour. However, they were all adamant that such behaviour is tackled quickly and consistently by staff through the sanctions process. Staff are supported well to ensure that this consistent approach is maintained, through regular training and support from senior leaders. One teacher who started the school in September 2014 explained eloquently how well she has been trained to take on board the academy's high expectations of behaviour management and to utilise the support provided.

Students speak highly of adult mentors and counsellors who support them when they are struggling to manage their own feelings or behaviour. Any incident of misbehaviour is meticulously recorded and students' future conduct is monitored on a daily basis. This helps to identify emerging concerns quickly and take proactive work to reduce the risk of escalation.

There is strong staff presence across corridors, at breaks and lunchtimes and when students are outside. Students report that this helps them to feel safe and that there is always someone to talk to easily when they have a concern. Students report that bullying is not a significant concern in the academy, stating that occasional name-calling is the main form. They all say authoritatively that any bullying would be stamped out quickly once an adult was informed. Students also say they are taught well about recognising different types of bullying, including homophobic bullying, racist or cyber-bullying. They say this helps them to take action to be safe and when to alert staff when they have concerns. The academy's anti-bullying policy does not reflect the good work that is taking place and needs to be brought into line with emerging and existing good practice.

The academy's sponsor has invested heavily in welfare teams across all academy schools and the work they do together with other staff has had a demonstrable impact on the attendance rates of students and their inclusion into school. Students at risk of not attending are visited at home and brought into the academy. Where there are concerns about particular families, staff spend time working directly with students to help them get into lessons and ready to learn. They also secure support from other agencies to help the family in times of crisis. Actions taken are making a positive difference to attendance rates. The gap between Excelsior students' attendance and that of other students nationally is narrowing. Academy data indicate that the number of students who are persistently absent has reduced by nearly half in the past two years. However, rates are still above those found nationally.

The philosophy of 'schools within a school' ensures that all students are known to staff well. This enables early identification of problems so staff can tackle concerns quickly. The pastoral and support work that staff undertake ensures that students at risk of exclusion are supported well and there have been no permanent exclusions since the academy opened. Fixed-period exclusions are below those found nationally. There is no external alternative provision. There is some space in the academy's own secondary schools for temporary exclusion from class, but students stay for very short times and there are few occasions when this facility has been

needed. When students are removed from lessons, they undertake the same work as their peers do.

The academy's culture of inclusion can be seen in the increasing proportion of students who come from schools from across the city to make a fresh start here. Strategies to support students newly arrived from Eastern and Central Europe, including those who have never attended a school before, are providing a good induction into life at Excelsior and underpin the academy's high expectations regarding behaviour and safety.

Priorities for further improvement

- Further develop strategies to reduce the proportion of students who are persistently absent from school.
- Ensure that the academy's anti-bullying policy identifies all types of bullying, particularly for those protected groups as identified in the Equality Act 2010.
- Ensure that the behaviour for learning strategy is used successfully across all classes and by all teachers.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Children's Services, to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow
Her Majesty's Inspector