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27 February 2012

Mrs Linda Halbert  
Principal  
Freebrough Academy  
Linden Road  
Brotton  
Saltburn  
North Yorkshire  
TS12 5SJ

Dear Mrs Halbert

## **Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Freebrough Academy**

### **Introduction**

Following my visit with Margaret Farrow, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 22 and 23 February 2012, 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, senior leaders and middle managers, groups of students and an external consultant. They also met with the Chair and vice-chair of the Governing Body and a local authority governor, all of whom also represented the lead sponsors. Inspectors observed 18 part-lessons and the provision for students at risk of exclusion or who have misbehaved in lessons, and visited four tutorials and an assembly.

### **Context**

Freebrough Academy opened in September 2010 and operates on the site of its predecessor school, Freebrough Specialist Engineering College. It is sponsored by Teesside University, Prior Pursglove College, and Redcar and Cleveland Borough

Council. Its lead education partner is Redcar and Cleveland College. The academy's specialisms are Business and Enterprise, and it has recently been awarded regional hub status for the Peter Jones Business and Enterprise Academy. The academy is smaller than average with 770 students aged 11 to 16 on roll. The majority of students live in small, scattered communities. Almost all of the students are of White British heritage. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is very high. Over a quarter of students have been identified as requiring additional support as a result of their disability or special educational needs. The proportion of these students with a statement of special educational needs is above average. The Principal has been in post since April 2010. Almost all teaching and support staff transferred to the academy from the predecessor school. However, there has been a significant change in staffing at all levels since the academy opened. The deputy Principal and the majority of middle leaders joined the academy in January 2011. The director of finance and corporate services, and the human relations manager are joint appointments with Thornaby Academy.

### **Achievement of students at the academy**

Students' attainment on entry into the academy in Year 7 is significantly below average. Their reading ages are particularly low. When the academy opened in September 2010, assessment information showed that only 17% of Year 11 students were on track to achieve at least five GCSEs grade A\*-C, including English and mathematics. Decisive actions taken by leaders effectively tackled some of the underlying underachievement and as a result over 33% eventually attained this benchmark by summer 2011. These results were an improvement on those in the predecessor school. Nonetheless, this group of students made inadequate progress in English and mathematics even when taking their low starting points on entry into account. Consequently the academy did not meet the government's floor standards which set the minimum expectations for attainment and progress in the 2010/11 academic year. However, students' achievement and progress in science were good, and continue to be a strength of the academy.

Evidence from lesson observations, and the academy's detailed assessment information on students' current achievements, indicates that the majority of students are now making better progress in lessons, not least due to improvements in the quality of teaching. A range of activities have been developed to promote students' reading and numeracy skills and these are effectively narrowing the gap between students' achievements and age-related expectations. Strategies include targeted activities for students at risk of underachieving, accelerated reading experiences in regular tutor-group time, and more teachers planning lessons across the curriculum that develop literacy, numeracy and communication skills. There is little variation in the progress made by boys and girls in lessons, which represents an improvement on previous years. This is because a rigorous system of performance reviews with faculty leaders and individual teachers is making sure students' progress is monitored regularly and actions to identify any underachievement are

proving increasingly effective. Similarly, improvements in the systems to identify and support disabled students and those with special educational needs are helping to narrow the gap between their achievements and that of their peers, although as yet these strategies are in the early stages of development.

The academy's tracking system and work scrutinies also demonstrate that the rate of students' progress is accelerating. Students' presentation of their work is generally good and inspectors' scrutiny of their books showed there is little time wasted in lessons.

### **The quality of teaching**

The academy's leaders have taken robust and decisive action to improve the quality of teaching. The impact of their actions can be seen in achievement that is rising and the better rates of progress students are now making in lessons. The large majority of teaching in the lessons observed was good and none was inadequate. Good relationships between adults and students build their confidence and self-esteem successfully and this helps promote positive attitudes to learning. Students generally speak thoughtfully when responding to questions or when seeking clarification about their work. They are usually sensitive to the needs and interests of their peers, taking turns and encouraging each other when working in groups or pairs.

The best lessons are well planned and carefully managed to include all learners and use any support assistants wisely. Teachers have good subject knowledge and incorporate a range of activities to capture students' interest and make learning relevant. There is a brisk pace and links are established to other subjects. In these lessons, students respond quickly to staff and apply themselves diligently to learning. Notable differences observed by inspectors in less effective lessons included over-lengthy teacher input, symptomatic of too great a focus on teaching and giving information, rather than engaging students as active participants and enabling them to take responsibility for their own learning; and more limited use of questioning to extend students' responses and deepen their thinking.

While a consistent approach to lesson planning has been adopted, this focuses too much on identifying teaching techniques rather than the difference teaching will make to learning and progress. Learning targets are set for different abilities and learning objectives are made explicit at the beginning of each lesson but students are usually presented with the same activities and complete similar tasks. Consequently, work is too easy for some and too difficult for others. This is largely because the academy's accurate assessment information is not yet being used effectively by teachers to plan activities that closely match students' varying learning needs and provide the right level of challenge. While there are examples of teachers using good evaluative marking and feedback to help students understand how well

they are doing, academy leaders know that this is not yet consistently good across all subjects.

### **Behaviour and safety of students**

Students speak convincingly about how much behaviour has been transformed for the better over the last year and the positive impact this has on their enjoyment of lessons and their attendance. This is confirmed by the impressive rise in the attendance rate of students and the eradication of gaps in the attendance of different groups of students. When the academy opened in September 2010, attendance rates were well below average; current attendance rates for the vast majority of student groups are above average. All of the students spoken with during this inspection reported that they feel safe and this is reflected in the students' responses to the academy's own questionnaires. Students say that bullying, including prejudice-based bullying, is not tolerated and that robust action is taken if any is identified. Students adopt safe practices and are taught well about managing risks regarding their personal safety. Links with external agencies and the addition of specialist support staff is making a significant contribution to the personal and emotional well-being of all students and in particular for those who are experiencing difficulties or feeling vulnerable for whatever reason.

Students demonstrate positive attitudes to learning in most lessons and behave well as they move around the academy. They arrive promptly to lessons and wait to go into classes in an orderly manner. Students comment that the number of lessons disrupted by poor behaviour is now low and mainly confined to times when teachers either do not apply the behaviour management policy consistently or when they are taught by some temporary teachers. Students also speak about how the improvements in behaviour have led to a significant reduction in the number of students temporarily excluded from school. The academy's data confirms that this reduction is impressive, as is the reduction in the proportion of students who have been permanently excluded. In 2010, seven students were permanently excluded and currently there are none. Partnerships the academy has forged with the fire brigade, police and youth services have noticeably reduced instances of anti-social behaviour in the local area and this is adding to the positive views of the academy that are growing within the local community.

### **The quality of leadership in and management of the academy**

The Principal provides an extremely focused and convincing direction for the academy. Her vision for the academy is crystal clear and inspirational. As a result, staff and students alike have high expectations and aspirations. The academy has worked hard to build productive relationships with home and the local community, to engage parents and carers and to communicate more effectively with them. This ensures that the academy's high expectations are understood and shared more widely.

The Principal has created a mutually supportive senior leadership team. Shrewd appointments have resulted in a team of middle managers who are wholeheartedly and energetically committed to accelerating the academy's improvement journey. Some difficult decisions and decisive actions have had to be taken but these have resulted in a significantly improved culture and ethos throughout the academy and a much more effective climate for learning. The impact of the academy's strong leadership is most clearly seen in the improving outcomes of attendance and behaviour and the better progress students are now making in lessons.

The academy has good capacity to improve. Strategic planning is effective and targeted on those areas in most urgent need of change. A clear infrastructure is now in place alongside a well-understood cycle of implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This is effectively linked to robust performance management arrangements for staff and well-targeted professional development activities. Systems have been put into place to ensure that students' achievements are regularly tracked and reviewed, although as yet not all teachers are using this assessment data effectively to plan activities that cater for students' differing needs.

The senior leadership team and the governing body are astutely aware of the academy's strengths and shortcomings. The governing body and sponsors are kept very well informed about all aspects of the academy's work as a result of the detailed reports the Principal provides. Governing body members and sponsors have played an important part in supporting and challenging senior leaders to tackle underperformance decisively and effectively. Safeguarding arrangements meet current requirements securely.

### **External support**

The quality of support from external partners has been good and valued by the academy leaders. Increasingly, resources and expertise are being shared. External support from sponsors is beginning to open up new, wider curricular opportunities for students. A variety of consultants have been employed to work with academy staff and they have contributed effectively to improvements in the students' behaviour and the quality of teaching. The Open Academies Education Adviser visited the academy in December 2011 and identified similar areas of improvement and areas for development found by the inspectors.

### **Main Judgements**

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

### **Priorities for further improvement**

By September 2012 ensure that teachers:

- use assessment information to plan activities that always take account of students' differing levels of ability
- provide more opportunities for students to be active participants in lessons and take responsibility for their own learning
- use questioning techniques effectively to challenge students and extend their thinking
- improve the consistency and quality of marking and provide written feedback that always explains to students what they need to do next to improve their work further.

I am copying this letter 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 posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Ripley  
Her Majesty's Inspector