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29 March 2011

Mr N Marshall
Principal
Grace Academy Darlaston
Herberts Park Road
Wednesbury
West Midlands
WS10 8QJ

Dear Mr Marshall,

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Grace Academy Darlaston

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 29 and 30 March 2011 with Derrick Baughan HMI, 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, including 20 lesson observations undertaken jointly with senior leaders. They scrutinised documents, including safeguarding documentation, and met with the principal, nominated staff, groups of students and three representatives of the governing body.

Context

The academy opened in September 2009 in the accommodation of its predecessor, Darlaston Community School, which was in special measures at the time of its closure. Most staff transferred to the academy, although the principal and the three vice-principals were all new appointments. A number of key middle leadership appointments have also been made since the academy opened. Plans for a new academy building are in place, adjacent to the existing school. In the interim, significant work has been undertaken to rehabilitate the predecessor school's ailing accommodation. The academy is one of three currently sponsored by The Grace Foundation. Its specialist subjects are business and enterprise.

The academy is smaller than average, with 844 students on roll, including 80 in the sixth form. Most students come from the immediate locality, an area that experiences high levels of social and economic disadvantage. A large majority of students are White British and most speak English as their first language. Small but significant numbers of students are

January 2011



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

from Bangladeshi, Pakistani or Indian heritage. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is more than twice the national figure. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average.

The academy is making some redundancies to address levels of over-staffing.

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

On entry to the academy student attainment is low. In its first year the academy suitably prioritised the achievement of students in Year 11 and successfully exceeded its main Key Stage 4 target. In GCSE examinations in 2010, 32% of students achieved at least five A*-C grades (including English and mathematics), a marked increase on previous years. However, standards remain very low because a significant minority of students, who had disengaged from school, achieved very little. Raising the aspirations of students who have low expectations remains a major challenge.

Although standards across the academy are low, the results in its first year, and early entry results for the current Year 11, demonstrate that the academy is on a clear trajectory of improvement. Assessment information indicates that it will significantly exceed its 2010 results this year and will further narrow the national attainment gap. The academy makes good use of rigorous assessment data to set ambitious targets, to track and analyse the progress of individual students and to implement suitable interventions. Students know their individual targets for each subject and how they can improve their level of performance. Evidence from lesson observations indicates that standards are rising. The quality of learning was at least good in the large majority of lessons observed during the inspection. Several lessons had outstanding features that accelerated the progress that all groups were able to make. However, in many cases these gains are only making up for previously inadequate achievement and significant gaps in students' knowledge, understanding and skills.

Published data and assessment information indicate that sixth-form students make progress that is broadly in line with their capabilities.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The academy has achieved a remarkably rapid transformation in student outcomes. Attendance and punctuality have improved significantly and exclusions have fallen sharply. The attitudes and behaviour of most students, rather than being a barrier to their engagement and achievement, are becoming notable strengths. Students behave impeccably in assembly; around the site and at break and lunchtimes they are orderly and considerate; and their welcoming approach towards visitors reflects their growing pride and confidence in their academy. In lessons, students behave well and comply with teachers' expectations. They respond enthusiastically when encouraged to take responsibility for their learning, although many are quite passive in lessons and lack the confidence to volunteer answers and share ideas. The students' improved attitudes are beginning to make a positive

contribution to their progress because they are increasingly valuing their learning. However, teachers still have to work hard to engage their interest, build their self-confidence and sustain their efforts. Many students still lack confidence, for example when asked to work in pairs, to volunteer answers or to express their own views.

The effectiveness of provision

Every aspect of the provision has been significantly strengthened since the academy opened. Leaders ensure that the continuous process of planning and review is used to routinely adapt and improve provision. Student voice is integral to this process, with some innovative approaches to strengthening teaching being piloted in response to students' initiative. The well-organised curriculum has developed suitable pathways for different groups and greater flexibility to meet the needs of individual students. A far wider range of extra-curricular activities and enrichment opportunities has been developed, much in response to the wishes of the students themselves. The small sixth-form provision meets the needs and aspirations of those students who choose to stay at the academy post-16.

The quality of teaching has improved remarkably. Inadequate teaching has been addressed and there is a core that is consistently good or better. Although residual weaknesses remain, there are a number of common strengths and some excellent practice, often from the newest recruits. Positive relationships between adults and students create a good climate for learning across the academy. This ensures that students settle quickly, stay on task and that lesson time is well used. Work is carefully planned and well directed. Interactive whiteboards are used effectively to structure lessons, provide stimulating resources and aid teachers' expositions. As teachers grow in confidence some outstanding features are emerging. In the best lessons the teacher's infectious enthusiasm and enjoyment of their subject injected pace and challenge that circumvented students' natural reticence, enabling, for example, Year 11 students to craft ambitiously imaginative writing and Year 10 students to lose their inhibitions in their musical performance. The best questioning engages all students, probes their understanding and challenges them to apply their learning.

Most lessons strike the right balance between teacher input and independent or supported learning. However, when teachers either talk for too long or fail to check students' understanding, lessons lose focus and impetus. Pupils' learning and progress are noticeably uneven when teachers do not use pair and group work effectively. These disparities are rooted in the quality and detail of lesson planning and the care with which teachers plan specific learning activities to challenge and engage all students.

Assessment and target setting are emerging strengths of teaching. Students know their targets and are given clear guidance on what constitutes better work through, for example, the 'steps to success'. In one observed lesson the students defined for themselves the specific learning outcomes so that they understood precisely what needed to be demonstrated in their work. Marking is completed conscientiously, but its impact is variable. At its most effective it contributes strongly to accelerating progress because students are

clear precisely and immediately about what they need to do to improve. Peer and self-assessment are well used by many teachers.

The academy has given care, guidance and support high priority. The impact of this work is seen in the overall improvements in the figures for attendance, behaviour and exclusions, and also in the marked improvements in the behaviour, attitudes and engagement of individual students.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Strong strategic leadership from the principal and his senior team has transformed provision and laid the foundations for the academy to follow a clear path of improvement. Day-to-day management is excellent because, from the outset, leaders and managers have ensured that they have been highly visible and available to welcome students and provide consistent guidance and encouragement. Communicating these high expectations has increased the morale, cohesiveness and confidence of staff, students and parents. The leadership team and governing body share an ambitious vision for the academy's future, based on securing the best possible outcomes for students and developing the academy at the heart of the local community. The academy is beginning to win the confidence of the local community. It is forging local partnerships and building stronger links with parents and carers.

Procedures for monitoring the academy's work are systematic and rigorous. Evaluations of teaching have clarified the academy's expectations, addressed areas of weakness and strengthened provision. The appointment of teaching and learning consultants has facilitated the sharing of best practice within faculties, but there remains variation across the academy, for example in expectations as to how work is marked. Academy self-evaluation effectively informs individual and whole-school support and training, underpins development planning and ensures that ambition is embedded at all levels. Governors are well-informed and are actively involved in monitoring the academy's performance. The academy has demonstrated a strong capacity to sustain the improvements made in the first 18 months and to further strengthen the outcomes for students.

The academy recognises that attainment is not yet high enough and that too many students have, in the past, left school ill-equipped for the next stage of their education or for adult life. Clear strategies have been developed to promote the engagement of students who might otherwise become educationally disaffected. Raising and meeting the aspirations of these students remains a significant challenge.

External support

The strength and complementary skills of the academy's leadership team require little external guidance. However, it is able to turn to the Grace Foundation for support when necessary and the expertise within the three academies is beginning to be shared across the group. The support and challenge provided by the School Improvement Partner and the Director of Education are particularly valued.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Share the exemplary practice that exists in teaching and in the use of assessment to further accelerate the progress that students make in lessons and over time.
- Develop and embed strategies to secure the engagement and better achievement of the most hard-to-reach groups of students in each year group.

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

Yours sincerely

Mr Paul Brooker

Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body
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