

Grace Academy Darlaston

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	135956
Local authority	N/A
Inspection number	381979
Inspection dates	21–22 March 2012
Lead inspector	Paul Brooker HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Academy
School category	Non-maintained
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	816
Of which number on roll in the sixth form	95
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Robert Edmiston
Headteacher	David Shaw (Principal)
Date of previous school inspection	N/A
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Introduction

Inspection team

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Her Majesty's Inspector
Additional inspector
Her Majesty's Inspector
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This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. In total, the inspection team visited 41 lessons observing 40 teachers, the majority of which were undertaken jointly with senior leaders. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documents including students' work, the academy's self-evaluation and student tracking data, and evaluated the arrangements made for safeguarding. Meetings were held with nominated staff, groups of students and a representative of the governing body. No returns were available from the on-line questionnaire (Parent View), but inspectors analysed inspection questionnaire responses from 30 parents and carers, 111 students and 47 staff.

Information about the school

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. It is one of three academies sponsored by The Grace Foundation and has business and enterprise as its specialist subjects. Most staff transferred from the predecessor school, but the academy has had to address significant over-staffing in the first two years. Many of the senior and middle leaders have been appointed since the academy opened. At the time of the inspection, the Principal had been in post just five weeks, following the departure of the substantive Principal to take up post in a sister academy. The new academy building is under construction and is due for completion in 2013.

The academy is smaller than the average-sized secondary school. A small sixth form opened in September 2009, and is expanding year-on-year. A large majority of students are White British and most speak English as their first language. Small but significant numbers of students are of Bangladeshi, Pakistani or Indian heritage. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is far higher than the national figure. The proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs is also above average. The academy reached the government floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for attainment and progress.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory and 4 is inadequate
 Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall Effectiveness	4
Achievement of pupils	4
Quality of teaching	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils	3
Leadership and management	3

Key Findings

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could reasonably be expected to perform. The school is therefore given a notice to improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to students’ progress and achievement, the quality of teaching and the behaviour and attitudes of the most challenging students.

- Grace Academy has surmounted many challenges since it opened, but its transformation is not yet complete and its overall effectiveness is inadequate. It has achieved undeniable success in raising standards, increasing students’ attendance and participation, and raising aspirations. Students themselves are unequivocal about how much safer they feel, and about the improvements in behaviour and teaching. However, the quality of learning in lessons is too variable to secure consistently good progress across the curriculum.
- Achievement is inadequate because attainment remains too low and gaps are not closing rapidly enough. Standards at Key Stage 4 have risen, but remain well below national figures, particularly for boys. Wide gaps in performance persist for most groups of students, including disabled students and those with special educational needs. Standards of literacy are low.
- Teaching has improved and is satisfactory, with some notable strengths, but it is not yet good enough to accelerate progress for all groups in order to address the legacy of low aspiration and poor attainment. Some weak teaching persists.
- Behaviour and safety are satisfactory. Around the academy the students’ behaviour is safe and orderly, and often considerate and welcoming. However, the calm climate is reliant on high levels of staff supervision and occasional intervention and support by senior and middle leaders. The challenging attitudes and behaviour of a small minority of students are generally well managed, but sometimes disrupt learning.
- The very small sixth form is satisfactory. Assessment information indicates that sixth-form students make progress that is broadly in line with their capabilities.
- The academy has demonstrated the capacity to sustain further improvement. Most senior leaders and managers, including the governing body, share an

ambitious vision for the academy's development. The rigorous monitoring of performance has strengthened teaching and eradicated most weaknesses. There is a growing confidence in the academy amongst students, their parents and carers and across the wider community, but much work remains to be done to secure the commitment of all staff.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Narrow the attainment gap in 2012 and beyond and ensure that groups, including disabled students and those with special educational needs, make at least expected rates of progress to the end of Key Stage 4 by:
 - accelerating the progress of all groups of students in lessons
 - raising the aspirations and achievement of the most hard-to-reach students.
- Strengthen the overall quality of teaching throughout the academy so that, by July 2012, most lessons are good or better by:
 - eradicating residual inadequacies
 - sharing best practice in planning tasks that actively engage all students and develop their skills as active and independent learners
 - specifically developing students' skills in reading, speaking, listening and writing.
- Strengthen students' attitudes so they take responsibility for their own behaviour, and all lessons can proceed without disruption by:
 - replicating existing good practice in positive behaviour management
 - developing the self-esteem, social skills and engagement of students who are disaffected or at risk of underachievement.

Main Report

Achievement of pupils

Attainment is rising, but remains well below national figures. Results at the end of Key Stage 4 have improved steadily in the academy's first two years, and reliable projections 2012 and beyond show a clear trajectory of improvement. However, students' current learning and progress are not consistently good enough to make up for past unevenness or low starting points. Students do not close the gap in attainment because their long-term progress is uneven, and too few make the three levels of progress expected in either English or mathematics between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. Students from Indian or Bangladeshi heritage achieve comparatively well, but the progress made by disabled students and those with special educational needs is generally weaker than their peers. Raising the aspirations of students who have low expectations remains a particular challenge.

The academy makes effective use of assessment data to set ambitious targets, to monitor the students' progress and implement suitable interventions for those in danger of falling behind. This helps to raise students' expectations because they

know their targets and how they might improve their level of performance. Nonetheless, the quality of learning was no better than satisfactory in the majority of lessons observed during the inspection. Progress is most rapid when teaching is skilfully directed so that all students are actively engaged throughout the lesson. Uneven progress is due, in part, to weaknesses in planning. Even when teachers prepared excellent resources on topical issues, using stimulating images or videos, learning activities did not necessarily involve or challenge all students, particularly when they were passive or indifferent.

Teachers do not adopt common strategies for developing students' oracy or literacy skills. Students sometimes work together to collate their ideas and draft key words, but teachers often launch into questioning without first giving students the opportunity to share and articulate their thinking. Teachers do not model writing consistently well and often miss opportunities to improve students' writing by providing specific guidance or giving them time to draft and edit their work. Opportunities to develop reading skills are also missed. For example, students are expected to read in some tutorial sessions, but the activity is somewhat purposeless because many simply choose to flick through magazines.

Sixth-form students make expected progress from their respective starting points, although some find AS level courses difficult and either give up or have to repeatedly re-sit their examinations, particularly in science subjects and in mathematics. In vocational courses of study, students make better progress due to effective teaching strategies and course content which are well-matched to their needs and interests.

Quality of teaching

Teaching is improving, but its effectiveness varies widely and a very small minority of lessons are ineffective. The majority of parental responses agreed that students are well taught, but they were rightly critical of the wide variation in teaching quality. Good lessons are well planned with suitably ambitious outcomes for different groups and carefully prepared activities that successfully engage all students from the outset. In a French lesson for example, Years 7 and 8 students were issued with unfamiliar words that they had to de-code using clues found around the classroom. Importantly, the best lessons consider how the students will learn and plans include activities that allow them time to collaborate, to reflect and develop their wider social skills. The most effective teachers focus briskly on learning and make clear their expectations, they nurture positive attitudes and relationships with and between students through their infectious enthusiasm and the judicious use of praise. However, some teaching is not sufficiently ambitious, and some teachers do not work hard enough to create a stimulating classroom environment that is conducive to highly quality learning.

Lessons often focus on interesting and topical issues. For example, students considered whether to ban boxing, to allow euthanasia, and the rights and wrongs of birth control, while sixth-form students explored the issue of racism through their work on Othello and violent relationships in their general studies session. Excellent resources encourage students to take a standpoint on important moral questions and positively promote their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. However,

opportunities to reflect and explore issues in detail were often missed because students had too little opportunity to exchange their ideas in pairs or small groups.

Assessment and target setting are emerging strengths of teaching, although the impact of assessment varies widely. Most teachers mark work conscientiously and set suitable homework, and some excellent marking, for example in English, has a positive impact on students' progress.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Most students have positive attitudes to learning and are punctual, attend well and behave responsibly. The good behaviour of the majority of students contributes positively to a safe and orderly environment. The academy's clear behaviour management policy, which includes both sanctions and the lure of rewards, has created a settled climate in lessons and during break and lunch times. However, the challenging behaviour of a small minority of students is not handled consistently well because teachers do not have equally high expectations, and some choose to ignore truculence and non-compliance. The concerns raised by a few parents and carers about antisocial or disorderly behaviour in lessons have some foundation. Although effective systems are in place to promote good behaviour, lessons are sometimes disrupted by the desultory attitudes, lateness or rudeness of individuals.

The academy has rightly prioritised the engagement of those students who are most at risk of disaffection and underachievement, and can point to notable successes. Overall attendance has risen dramatically and persistent absenteeism has seen a corresponding decrease, while exclusions have also reduced markedly. Engaging the most hard-to-reach students is, however, an ongoing challenge because it is difficult to ensure that they are fully included while maintaining unequivocal expectations about behaviour. A small but significant number of students lack the self-discipline, aspiration or self-esteem to willingly conform or engage positively. However, the vertical tutor system promotes greater respect and responsibility. Students generally feel safe and free from different forms of bullying and say that the academy deals quickly and effectively with occasional incidents that occur. Steps to encourage students to take responsibility, such as peer mentoring, also have a positive impact.

Leadership and management

Senior leaders have successfully maintained the drive to raise standards while steering the academy through a difficult period of significant financial cuts. The academy has necessarily tackled some challenging and deep-seated staffing issues in order to strengthen teaching and raise standards, but inspection questionnaire responses reflect a lack of unity among staff. Some departments, such as mathematics, are more cohesive and supportive than others, particularly for new teachers. Systematic procedures are in place to monitor and evaluate the impact of the academy's work and plan improvement. At the heart of this endeavour is a determination to ensure equal opportunity for all students. Better provision is increasing key outcomes, and underpins the academy's capacity to sustain further improvement. However, morale is not uniformly high and some staff express the view that the academy's rigorous monitoring regime does not support their professional development.

The academy is developing suitable strategies for engaging with parents and carers, including those who have found working with the academy difficult. Parents and carers, like staff and students, comment on the academy's positive development and impact, but they also identify weaknesses, particularly in regard to achieving consistency in teaching and the management of behaviour.

Changes to the curriculum, including the development of a suitably wide range of extra-curricular activities and enrichment opportunities, have contributed positively to student engagement and improving standards. The academy is innovative in adapting its provision to meet the needs of its students, for example in combining students in Years 7 and 8. The impact of these initiatives is not yet evident, but the development of pathways for different groups has laid the foundations for future increases. The small sixth-form provision is tailored to meet the aspirations of those students who choose to stay at the academy post-16, but the relatively low retention rate at the end of Year 12 suggests that some sixth-form students are not well equipped to make the transition to independent academic study.

The governing body provides a suitable level of challenge and supports the academy well, for example, by encouraging partnerships to promote beneficial business links and productive community engagement. Its determination to develop its core values and promote students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is reflected in the 'values days,' and the student rewards for positive engagement. The academy's arrangements for safeguarding meet all current requirements and ensure that students feel safe.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Behaviour	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



23 March 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Grace Academy Darlaston, Wednesbury, WS10 8QJ

Thank you for the positive contribution that you made to our recent inspection. We really enjoyed talking to you and seeing your work. Your views, alongside those of your parents and carers, were helpful in confirming our own findings. You were quick to point out how much the academy has improved, but you also told us what needs to be better. You said, for example, that behaviour has been transformed since the academy opened, that lessons are better and that school is more enjoyable. However, you also said that some lessons are still disrupted by poor behaviour and that you make much better progress in some subjects than others. We agree that there are not enough really good or outstanding lessons to help you to make good progress. We have asked the academy specifically to:

- raise standards so that your results are closer to the national figures
- improve teaching so that more lessons are good or outstanding
- ensure that lessons are not disrupted by poor behaviour.

Since the academy opened there have been many developments which are already having a positive impact. Staff have worked hard to ensure that you now have much better opportunity to achieve well. However, inspectors judge that your academy still requires significant improvement and have issued it with a notice to improve. This means that things must improve rapidly within the next 12 months, but this will not happen unless you all play your part. Your progress and achievement rely on you taking responsibility for your own conduct, effort and participation.

We wish you all every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector

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