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Mr D Shaw
The Headteacher
Grace Academy Darlaston
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Dear Mr Shaw

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Grace Academy Darlaston

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your academy on 7 November 2012 and for the information which you provided during the inspection.

At the end of the summer term 2012 a significant number of teachers left the academy. As a result, the English teaching team is substantially new, as are three of the seven science teachers. Three new heads of faculty took up their posts in September for faculties covering English, mathematics and science. Also in September, the academy opened the Aspire centre which provides an intensive skills-based curriculum for Year 7 students who have joined the academy with low prior attainment. A complete new build for the academy is underway and is on target.

As a result of the inspection on 21 and 22 March 2012, the academy was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the academy is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the students' achievement.

The unconfirmed GCSE results from 2012 indicate that overall results, taking all subjects into account, have increased significantly. This shows that the academy's curriculum is meeting the needs, interests and aptitudes of all students better and in particular those students who find learning much more difficult and those who are disabled or have special educational needs. Results in English were not as good as expected. However, the English teaching team is substantially new since September, with a new head of faculty. The academy has carefully looked at the progress

students are currently making and has engaged an external consultant to check on the findings. This confirms that progress in English is now improved and inspection evidence backs this up. GCSE mathematics results improved in 2012, and the progress that students make is closer to national expectations. Students make more progress in lessons across all subjects. This progress is aided by new schemes of learning recently introduced. These have been totally rewritten in each of English, mathematics and science and are matched closely to the students' previous understanding. The planning of future work is therefore much closer to their needs. Formal and systematic ways of keeping a check on students' progress have also been standardised across the academy so that leaders and managers can check more easily that the required progress is being made at regular intervals.

The quality of teaching is improving. Past weaknesses have been successfully eradicated. About a third of teachers are relatively new in their careers, and this presents both challenges and opportunities. Teachers are enthusiastic and work well in their faculty teams to share practice and develop the new schemes of learning. Each faculty has an experienced member of staff as a teaching and learning consultant and they are effectively enabling their less experienced colleagues to develop rapidly. In addition, the academy has secured the services of an experienced consultant who is working across the academy for one year to support the development of teachers' expertise. Some newer teachers are currently less skilled than more experienced colleagues in enabling their students to be active and independent learners. Through well planned professional development, work is in progress to equip teachers to develop students' literacy skills across the curriculum more effectively. This is having an impact in some faculties but, as the training is still on-going, the impact is not yet substantial. The new Aspire centre in Year 7 is proving effective in enabling students who enter the academy with weak literacy skills to make good progress in their reading, writing and wider social skills.

Students' behaviour is improving. The academy's behaviour policy has been updated and re-launched. It provides an appropriate balance of rewards and sanctions. In most lessons teachers manage behaviour well, but this is not yet consistently the case with teachers newer to the profession.

The academy specialism for business and enterprise continues to have a positive impact on the academy. In particular, the links fostered with industry and commerce have made an impact on improving the self-esteem and engagement of some students who are at risk of becoming uninterested or dissatisfied by what the school can offer, by giving them an insight into realistic and challenging opportunities that exist for them when they leave the academy.

The academy's statement of action has been assessed by Ofsted as fit for purpose. It is proving to be a useful tool to promote improvement. Academy planning is thorough. Accountability through self-evaluation, both to governors and to the Grace Academy Foundation, is accurate and regular.

The academy has been well supported by central officers of the Grace Academy Foundation, by a Principal from another Grace academy and by teachers from Grace academies. Very valuable support has been received in legal and human resources areas, in mentoring staff, and in moderating the standards of work of students and the quality of teaching.

I hope that you have found the inspection helpful in promoting improvement in your academy. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Robert Barbour
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2012:

- 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 behavior, and all lessons proceed without disruption by:
 - replicating existing good practice in positive behavior management
 - developing the self-esteem, social skills and engagement of students who are disaffected or at risk of underachievement.