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Mr D Shaw
Principal
Grace Academy Darlaston
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Dear Mr Shaw

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Grace Academy Darlaston

Following my visit to your academy on 5 November 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in July 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, governors and the academy sponsor are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection. The academy should take immediate action to:

- accelerate the rate of students' progress in English in year 11 by:
 - ensuring all teachers immediately adopt the new marking policy and make sure that students act upon the advice and guidance given
 - ensuring that leaders, at all levels, with responsibility for English frequently and robustly monitor, evaluate and review the impact of the actions taken to increase the speed of student progress
- revise the academy's development plan so that interim student progress milestones are identified and that all actions are broken down into clearly defined small steps linked to measurable outcomes

- ensure that the procedures to monitor the work of faculties are consistently and frequently applied throughout the academy using the existing good practice
- ensure, as a matter of urgency, that the external review of the knowledge, skills and understanding of the governing body is carried out and that governors hold all school leaders in charge of areas of the academy's work to account for the progress and attainment of students.

Evidence

During the visit I met with you and the academy leadership team to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. Meetings were held with two members of the governing body including the Chair of Governors and the executive director of Grace Academies, 8 students from Years 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. I also met with the faculty leaders and the 'teaching and learning consultants' of English, mathematics and science. Your academy leaders showed me around the academy and we visited classes in Year 11 to see the students at work in English. I evaluated the academy improvement action plans. I looked at a range of documentation, including the academy's information about students' progress and the academy's self-evaluation document.

Context

Since the inspection the academy has moved into new buildings. You have increased the number of staff to provide support to students particularly in English and mathematics.

Main findings

Academy leaders, with the support of the academy sponsor, have implemented a number of actions since the inspection to speed up students' progress and attainment. As a result reasonable progress can be seen in some subjects, particularly in mathematics. However, the latest information shows that across year groups and in a number of subjects, especially in English, students make inadequate progress. This was confirmed in my visits to the Year 11 English classes. The recently introduced marking policy is not being used consistently in English and students are not given opportunities to act upon the advice given to them. The setting of student targets in English is confused and it is not obvious how these targets have been generated and communicated to students. The systems to monitor the progress of students in English are not clear and do not allow school leaders to accurately evaluate how well students are doing or to measure the impact of interventions put in place to support students falling behind.

Actions in the new improvement plans address the areas requiring improvement pinpointed by the inspection. However, the actions in these plans are very broad and do not identify the necessary steps and milestones to achieve success.

The recently appointed 'teaching and learning consultants' who are responsible for developing the quality of teaching in English, mathematics and science are having some success in improving how teachers use data to plan lessons. However, the procedures with which they, and the heads of faculty, monitor the impact of their work are inconsistent and not frequent enough to promote a sense of urgency.

Governors have a developing understanding of the effectiveness of the actions to improve the academy. They meet regularly to discuss the progress and attainment of students. However, not all governors are able to ask searching questions of academy leaders.

Students stated that behaviour in the academy has improved dramatically and this has helped their learning in the majority of subjects. They also said that there have been recent improvements in the quality of teaching in most subjects.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

I will return to the school in early January 2014 to monitor the academy's progress.

External support

The academy is working with a local outstanding school to improve the quality of teaching in English. The impact of this work is yet to be seen in measurable improvements in students' progress and attainment. The academy sponsor has recently identified a school improvement adviser to work with the academy leadership team. The academy does not have the capacity to tackle the underachievement of students in English, and in literacy, without support.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, The Education Funding Agency, the academy sponsor, the Academies Advisers Unit and the Director of Children's Services for Walsall.

Yours sincerely

Peter Humphries
Her Majesty's Inspector