

Tribal  
Kings Orchard  
One Queen Street  
Bristol  
BS2 0HQ

T 0300 123 1231  
Text Phone: 0161 6188524  
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

**Direct T** 0117 311 5359  
**Email:** christina.bannerman@tribalgroup.com

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Mr Graham Steele  
Interim Principal  
Grace Academy Darlaston  
Herberts Park Road  
Wednesbury  
Darlaston  
WS10 8QJ

Dear Mr Steele

**Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Grace Academy Darlaston**

Following my visit to your academy on 23 January 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. 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 second 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 academy sponsors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The academy should take further action to ensure:

- students make rapid progress in mathematics through an engaging curriculum and lessons that develop their mathematical fluency, reasoning and problem-solving skills
- all teachers consistently apply the academy's marking and feedback policy so that students understand how to improve their work
- the gap between disadvantaged students and other students in the academy and nationally is rapidly closed

- leaders at all levels rigorously check students' progress and quickly implement interventions for students not making the progress expected of them, particularly in mathematics.

## **Evidence**

During the inspection, meetings were held with the interim Principal, other senior leaders, members of the governing body and a representative of the academy sponsor to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I also met with the subject leaders of English, mathematics, science and literacy. I visited classes in Years 8, 9, 10 and 12 to see the students at work in English and mathematics. I spoke to the students about their learning and looked at the work in their books. I looked at a range of documentation, including the academy's information about students' progress.

## **Context**

Since the last monitoring inspection visit, the academy sponsor has appointed an interim Principal until the substantive Principal takes up his post in the summer term 2015. Forty members of staff including teachers, teaching assistants and administrative staff have left the academy, 25 teachers have been replaced. The academy has appointed eight new heads of department and five new senior leaders. Since the start of the new academic year, 18 new teachers have joined the academy.

## **Main findings**

The interim Principal has introduced a sense of urgency and purpose to the work of the academy. Students and staff are overwhelmingly positive about the changes he has introduced. The checking of students' progress is more thorough and teachers are held to account for the progress of the students in their classes. Students not making the progress expected are quickly identified and appropriate help and support put in place. This intervention is particularly effective in developing students' literacy skills. Teachers not reaching the standards expected are challenged to improve through appropriate support programmes. Academy leaders, including governors, have taken appropriate steps to increase the number of teachers who deliver lessons that help students to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding. The new members of the senior leadership team frequently check the work of subject leaders and teachers. As a result, information provided by the academy shows that the quality of teaching over time has improved. However, due to a lack of strong leadership in the past, the academy now faces a challenge to ensure students make enough rapid progress to make up for previous inconsistent teaching, especially in mathematics.

Academy leaders rightly prioritised developing students' literacy skills, including reading, writing and speaking and listening. Information provided by the academy shows that a large majority of students in all year groups are making the progress expected of them in English. The information also indicates that an increased proportion of students are reading at age-related expectations.

However, students' progress in mathematics is less secure as a result of inconsistent teaching, assessment and marking of students' work. Academy leaders have correctly identified this problem and have put appropriate strategies in place to speed up students' progress. The actions have yet to lead to sustained improvements.

Disadvantaged students are supported through a range of interventions. However, the gap between disadvantaged students leaving the academy at the end of Year 11 in 2014, and other students in the academy and nationally was over a GCSE grade in English and nearly two grades in mathematics. Information provided by the academy shows that this gap is closing across year groups.

Since the last monitoring inspection visit, governors have received training organised by the academy sponsor. As a result, the governing body is much more proactive in questioning and challenging leaders about the quality of teaching and students' progress. They know the academy's strengths and areas for improvement. Governors carry out their statutory duties effectively including those for safeguarding and finance.

### **External support**

The academy sponsor regularly reviews the work of the academy through the Academy Improvement Monitoring Board (AIMB). The academy is working in collaboration with Wood Green teaching school alliance to improve the quality of teaching, particularly in English, mathematics, science and humanities. Staff from Wood Green also moderate students' grades and levels awarded by academy teachers.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Walsall, the Education Funding Agency and the Academies Advisors Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Peter Humphries  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**