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7 July 2015

Darren Gelder  
Principal  
Grace Academy Solihull  
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Chelmsey Wood  
Birmingham  
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Dear Mr Gelder

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Grace Academy Solihull**

Following my visit to your academy on 7 July 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 first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, governors and the sponsor are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- Quicken the impact of actions taken to improve the attendance of those students regularly absent from the academy and continue to reduce exclusions rapidly so that they fall in line with national average. This is particularly applies for disadvantaged students.
- Ensure all action planning documents provide sharply measurable targets against which the intended impact of actions taken on the quality of teaching, students' achievement and behaviour can be monitored and evaluated precisely by leaders and governors.

## **Evidence**

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, as the Principal, the Chief Executive Officer of the Grace Academy Trust, the academy sponsor, and two members of the academy improvement board, which is the body responsible for the governance of the academy. I also met with groups of middle leaders and senior leaders. I undertook brief visits to a number of lessons accompanied by the Principal and looked at examples of students' work. A range of the academy's documents and records were also examined and evaluated, including the academy improvement plan and an additional action plan that has been written in response to the previous inspection.

## **Context**

Since the previous inspection, a number of teachers have returned from maternity leave. A teacher of English and a teacher of mathematics have been appointed to take up post at the beginning of the next academic year.

## **Main findings**

Leaders have responded positively and swiftly to the outcomes of the previous inspection. The previous inspection reflected the considerable improvements that the current Principal, supported by the Chief Executive Officer of the Grace Academy Trust, a skilled academy improvement board, and an increasingly strong leadership team had secured in a relatively short space of time. The findings of the inspection have been used to further inform what was already a robust academy improvement strategy in order to continue driving change forward at an impressive pace.

The impact of leaders' work is demonstrated by improvements in the quality of teaching, the achievement of students both in the current Year 11 and in other year groups, and improvements in some important aspects of students' behaviour. Information presented by leaders about the achievement of current students at the academy shows that some considerable gains are expected on the unacceptably low standards achieved in some areas of examination results last academic year. In English, the proportion of students making expected progress is predicted to be in line with national average. In mathematics, a sharp rise in the proportion of students making expected progress is projected, though this will remain below national average. In both subjects, too few students, including the most-able students, will make better than expected progress. This means that students' achievement is not yet good.

Further positive improvements are expected across a range of other subjects. Achievement in history and geography, although better than in previous years, will still be too low by the end of Year 11 and too few students are expected attain the highest grades in a range of subjects. Key groups of students, such as disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities or special education needs are

making quicker progress than they have done in the past. Improvements are also evident in other year groups, including in Key Stage 3 and reflect leaders' commitment to bringing about sustainable improvements. However, achievement in mathematics continues to lag behind that of English for some year groups and achievement between different groups of students remains too variable. Boys make slower progress than girls in English and, in some year groups, mathematics also. The progress made by students of different abilities is also inconsistent, with the most-able students sometimes not always making the progress that they should. Gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers are still too wide in places, but are closing over time.

Leaders have taken effective action to seek assurances that teachers' assessments are accurate. A wide range of external checks ensures that leaders and governors can have confidence in the information about students' achievement that they are presented with. Robust and systematic assessment practices and procedures are enabling underachievement to be identified and tackled quickly.

The impact of leaders' work to improve the sixth form is evident in the projected rise in attainment at most key thresholds for the current Year 12 and Year 13 and in students' much improved attendance. The academy's records show that students are, overall, expected to make good progress in relation to their targets. Effective plans are underway that include adapting the entry requirements to courses and changing aspects of the curriculum in order to secure further on-going improvements in retention rates and in achievement.

The quality of teaching is improving quickly. This is because high quality whole-school training is supplemented by a range of support strategies that focus on the developments needs of individual teachers. As a result, the academy's monitoring records show that there a much greater proportion of teaching is now good or better. During my short visits to lessons, I saw how teachers are using the training they have undertaken and adopting academy practices and procedures with consistency. Teachers are increasingly aware of, and able to use, the assessment information they gather to inform their planning of lessons. Different tasks and expectations are set for students that are matched to their capabilities and previous learning. Likewise teachers are more aware of the need to offer additional support for students who may be at risk of underachievement, including disadvantaged students. This is helping students, and different groups of students, to make better progress.

The academy's marking policy is applied with rigour. Students say that by having the opportunity to act on the guidance that their teacher offers them, it is helping them to improve their skills and understanding over time. In one lesson I visited, the teacher used the information that they had gained from marking students' work skilfully to organise their class into groups so that students could collaborate and work together to overcome areas of common weakness. Questioning is improving. When used best, teachers ask questions that challenge students to justify or explain

their answers and think more deeply. However, not all teachers are yet able to use questioning as well as others to check or extend students' learning. I saw too much disparity in the quality of students' presentation. Some teachers' expectations are not yet high enough and they do not insist that students take sufficient care or pride in their work. A smaller, but still significant minority of teaching is not yet of an acceptable standard.

New guidance has been written to support the teaching of reading, writing, communication and mathematical skills across subject areas. The implementation of these policies and accompanying training will form a key focus of the academy's work next academic year. The work of the librarian and reading clubs is beginning to develop a reading culture. The academy has invested in a careers package and leaders are now mapping out this programme to ensure that students' progression in careers education is carefully planned for.

Students attendance is, overall, better than last academic year. However, too many students, including disadvantaged students, are regularly absent from the academy. Although leaders are tackling this with greater rigour, these actions have not yet had time to have made a discernible difference. This remains a concern. Exclusions, though reducing since the time of the previous inspection, will remain, by the end of this academic year, far too high. Students' behaviour in lessons is improving. The academy's records show a considerable reduction in incidents of low-level disruption. This was confirmed both during my visits to lessons and through discussions with students during the inspection.

The skills of middle leaders are strengthening. Rigorous systems are in place to hold them to account for improving the quality of teaching in their teams and for monitoring and improving students' achievement. These systems, coupled with robust line management from senior leaders, are developing the skills and abilities of these middle leaders quickly. The development of leadership skills has been further supported in some cases by partnerships with other schools and organisations. Variation in the outcomes between subject areas means that, although capacity to improve is building, inconsistencies in the impact of these leaders persist.

Leaders have produced an action plan that supplements the existing academy improvement plan in order to ensure that the areas for improvement arising out of the previous inspection are tackled directly. Leaders have sensibly commissioned an external review of the academy's use of the pupil premium to further strengthen this aspect of the academy's provision. This review has also informed an action plan. These plans detail well-considered actions to address areas for improvement. At times, however, these actions are not always linked to sharply measurable targets, so that leaders and governors can precisely evaluate the impact and success that these actions will have on students' outcomes.

The academy improvement board is composed of professionals with extensive experience in education and from other backgrounds that complement the needs of

the academy effectively. Board members are astute and have the necessary skills to hold leaders to account for bringing about improvements. They are knowledgeable and understand the strengths of the academy and what areas need to be developed. This understanding is supported by the robust information they are provided with by the Principal and information that they gather first-hand from attendance at review meetings.

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

### **External support**

Highly effective external support is commissioned from a wide range of networks, including through Sponne School and the SWAN Teaching School Alliance, which is supporting improvements in the quality of teaching and of leadership. This support is carefully sourced and brokered to match the needs of the staff and academy improvement priorities. The Chief Executive Officer of the Grace Academy Trust plays a very active role in both monitoring and supporting academy improvements.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Academy Improvement Board and the Director of Children's Services for Solihull.

Yours sincerely

Chris Chapman  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**