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Mrs Anu Monga
Principal
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Dear Mrs Monga

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Grace Academy Coventry

Following my visit to your school on 4 December 2018 with Graeme Rudland, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in February 2018. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the principal, other school staff, the chief executive officer of the Grace Academy Trust (the trust), a representative of the trust's director, the three members of the academy improvement board, two groups of pupils and nine parents. The responses to the 110 submissions to the online survey, Parent View, were taken into account, along with 29 emails from parents sent before and during the inspection. The school's surveys of the views of parents and staff were considered. A range of documentation was examined, including leaders' checks on the quality of teaching, records of pupils' progress and attainment, and the school's single central register of staff. The trust's statement of action and the school's improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

Since the previous inspection, there have been substantial changes in staffing. Most members of the current middle leadership team, including heads of subjects and faculties, have joined the school since Easter 2018. Many other teachers are new to the school. More staff have been appointed to start at the school in January 2019.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The principal and her leadership team have achieved a great deal since the previous inspection. They have built on the early improvements noted in the inspection report. As a result, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is improving, and many pupils are making better progress. It is still early days, but standards are beginning to rise.

The most notable change to the school is in its ethos. Staff are now committed to providing the quality of education that pupils deserve. This turnaround has been driven by the passion and belief of the principal. In her words, 'If it's not good enough for my own children, then it's not good enough for anyone else's.' A shared sense of responsibility now exists, which places pupils' entitlement to a good education at the forefront.

The principal is building a team of leaders and teachers who share her vision and have the skills to deliver it. The trust supports her well in this. Trustees allocate additional funding, when appropriate, to provide the staff and resources necessary to improve the quality of education. Leaders have used this money wisely to enhance the capacity of middle and senior leaders. This has enabled them to maintain a high focus on improving the quality of teaching.

This has not been easy to achieve. Some staff found it very difficult to accept the need to change. The principal has been resolute in her efforts to improve the quality of education. Her resilience is paying off. Most teachers now fully subscribe to the principal's ambition. Many pupils are making better progress as a result. A very few teachers have struggled to make the necessary improvements. Consequently, a small amount of teaching remains weak. Teachers are well supported to become more effective. Nevertheless, leaders are, rightly, willing to take decisive action if improvement is insufficient.

The principal has led the school calmly and professionally through a very difficult time. Parents were unsettled by the substantial turnover in staff that resulted from the drive for improvement. She has worked extremely hard to help parents understand what is happening and why it must happen. They appreciate her time, patience and humility. Many now speak very highly of her leadership. The sentiment of most who spoke to inspectors or have expressed their views in writing can be summed up in the quote, 'You are brave, strong and gracious. I believe in you.'

A small group of parents continues to be more sceptical. Inspectors found that most of their concerns are unjustified. It remains the case that pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are not well served by the school. However, there is no evidence that parents' other complaints have any foundation.

Leaders have ensured that teachers' assessments are more accurate than they have been in the past. Teachers' judgements are verified across the department and in meetings with senior staff. Therefore, the data that the senior leaders use to evaluate the quality of teaching is more reliable and paints a truer picture of the school's effectiveness than was the case at the time of the previous inspection.

The previous inspection found that leaders were not using information about pupils' performance well enough to spot underachievement. Consequently, they were not acting quickly enough to ensure that pupils who needed to catch up did so. Senior leaders have refined their analysis of assessment information considerably. They now check the performance of different groups of pupils, such as disadvantaged pupils. This means they are well placed to catch those who are falling behind. They are beginning to bring together information about pupils' achievement in different subjects to plan appropriate additional support to address underperformance. Early signs are positive, but it is too soon to see widespread impact.

Following the previous inspection, the trust commissioned a review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding. Leaders have used the findings to help them substantially refocus their efforts on disadvantaged pupils. Teachers now know who these pupils are. Leaders are beginning to evaluate the impact of the funding to see if it is making enough difference to this group's progress.

Senior leaders are beginning to support the principal well to raise standards. They have established clear lines of accountability that hold staff closely to account for pupils' outcomes. These systems are used consistently across the school, including the sixth form. This is making a positive difference to pupils' progress. Further appointments have been made for January to strengthen senior leaders' capacity to maintain this initiative and further speed up the rate of improvement.

Middle leadership is now more effective. Middle leaders are growing in confidence and in their understanding of their roles. They are beginning to use improved assessment information to hold teachers in their department to account for pupils' progress. Their actions are having a positive impact on the quality of teaching.

For the first time in several years, the school now has a full complement of well-qualified staff. Pupils say that this has made a considerable difference to their experience. They have also noticed that teachers are now more committed to their education. Some key stage 4 pupils told an inspector that they feel, for the first time, that most teachers are interested in them and are prepared to listen to what they have to say.

Teachers, on the whole, now know the standards that pupils should be working at. This is, in part, the result of a substantial revision to the school's curriculum. Teachers, pupils and parents now have booklets that set out 'critical content' to be learned term-by-term in each subject. Some teachers use this very effectively to pitch work correctly, and to ensure that pupils systematically build the knowledge they need to perform well in the subject. During the inspection, this was seen happening particularly well in the science department.

Not all teachers use this guidance well enough. Previous weak teaching has left pupils with missing bits of knowledge. Some teachers do not understand that pupils need to have the necessary prior knowledge to tackle harder tasks. Consequently, the teacher pushes ahead with new learning before pupils are ready. As a result, pupils do not securely understand the concept. This leads to weak progress because it is not built on strong enough foundations. For example, in a mathematics lesson, pupils were trying to work out the volume of a cuboid. Many found this very difficult. In part, this is because they struggled to recall multiplication facts quickly. They had to put so much effort into these basic calculations, that they did not have enough thinking space left to remember what method they needed to find the answer.

Teachers value the training and support that they receive. Most try hard to act on the advice. Teachers now, generally, follow the school's policies closely. Therefore, pupils have a more consistent experience between classes and subjects. However, some teachers still do not know how to apply the policies effectively. For example, teachers routinely set work with varying degrees of challenge to cater for pupils' different abilities. Some do this effectively. They pitch the difficulty correctly so that the work is not too hard and not too easy. When this happens, pupils learn well and make good progress. However, some teachers still find this hard. Too many of the most able pupils still spend time completing work that they can do easily. Similarly, many teachers are unsure about how best to support lower-attaining pupils to make good progress. Teachers do simplify tasks for these pupils. However, they do not always find effective ways to overcome the fear of failure that some pupils experience. Consequently, lower-attaining pupils often lose focus in lessons and do not learn well.

Teachers know that leaders expect them to address pupils' weak spelling, punctuation and grammar regardless of the subject they teach. Some do this, but it is not done consistently. Some teachers allow errors to go unchecked, even when the misspelling is crucial for the subject they are teaching. For example, pupils studying a unit about the Crucifixion had misspelled the word as 'crucifin', 'crusifiction' and 'cruxifition'. At least one had spelled it in three different ways on the same page. In the same topic, 'Jesus' was spelled incorrectly by a number of pupils. Similarly, when writing about the First World War a number of pupils did not use capital letters when naming the British Empire. These basic errors are unacceptable.

The quality of most pupils' work is better than at the time of the previous inspection. Nevertheless, some pupils still lack pride in their work. Their books are untidy. Some do not bother to copy accurately from the board. Some complete very little work in lessons. This is because their teachers allow this to happen.

Pupils are perceptive in their view of the quality of teaching. They say that, overall, it has improved a lot. Pupils accurately describe the remaining weaknesses. They say that they learn little in some lessons because the teacher does not make it clear what they must do or sets work that is too difficult. They know that some teachers still find it hard to control the class when pupils misbehave. Pupils generally behave well. However, pockets of misbehaviour happen when tasks are not well pitched to pupils' understanding. Pupils say that those in the higher sets get the best teachers, particularly in key stage 4. This is, to some extent, true. In some subjects, the weakest teachers teach a disproportionate number of lower sets. Higher sets are often taught by stronger teachers. This means that pupils who find learning harder are often not getting the quality of teaching that they need. Leaders are addressing this and trying to compensate pupils who are adversely affected by the residual inadequate teaching. Nevertheless, the negative impact on some pupils' progress remains.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer or equivalent of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Coventry. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sandra Hayes
Her Majesty's Inspector