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Mr D Wootton
The Principal
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Dear Mr Wootton

Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to Grace Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Dilip Kadodwala HMI and Brian Sharples HMI to your academy on 12 and 13 December 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a first monitoring visit in connection with the academies initiative.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the principal, nominated staff, groups of students, and the sponsor who is also chair of the governing body.

Context

Grace Academy opened as an 11 to 18 school in September 2006, although its move into its state of the art new buildings was fragmented by their delayed completion. It is located adjacent to the former Whitesmore School, its 11 to 16 predecessor. The academy is a non selective school with an ethos based on Christian values, and subject specialisms in business and enterprise. It serves the community of Chelmsley Wood, an area that includes districts of high social and economic deprivation. The academy does not admit any students on the basis of their aptitude for its subject specialisms. It follows Solihull Local Authority's admission policy and is heavily oversubscribed.

The academy has 1144 students on roll, including 89 in the small sixth form. The great majority of students are from White British backgrounds and few speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is twice the national figure. The proportion with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also well above the national average, although the proportion with a statement of special educational needs is more broadly average.

Most staff from the predecessor school and almost all students transferred to the academy. Although the academy has faced difficulties recruiting teachers in a few subjects, it is fully staffed.

Achievement and standards

The attainment on entry of the older students is below average, although the prior attainment of the most recent Year 7 cohort is more broadly in line with standards seen nationally. However, there are comparatively few students with high levels of prior attainment, particularly in English and mathematics.

The academy's first set of results from national Key Stage 3 tests in English, mathematics and science in 2007 were below national benchmarks and below its challenging targets. When compared with results in the predecessor school, results showed significant improvement in English and science, but declined in mathematics. Performance at the higher Level 6 and above showed improvement, particularly in English.

Standards of attainment at GCSE in 2007 were well below national figures and slightly below the academy's own targets: 33% achieved at least five higher grade GCSEs, 19% including English and mathematics. However, 97% achieved at least one GCSE A* to G, and 92% achieved at least five A* to G grades, figures that are broadly in line with national average figures. More significantly, the students made satisfactory progress from their starting points, particularly when compared with their performance at Key Stage 3. Achievement was satisfactory overall, but ranged from very good in English to inadequate in mathematics and in information and communication technology (ICT). Half of the students achieved a higher grade in English, whereas in mathematics only one in four achieved this, and fewer than one in ten did so in ICT. The achievement of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those with lower prior attainment was slightly better than students generally.

Standards of attainment for the first Year 12 cohort in 2007 were comparatively low, reflecting the sixth form students' low starting points. Results of AS level in English, ICT and media studies were particularly good, but pass rates in biology, psychology and Spanish were unacceptably low. The academy recognises that the overall pass rate of 79% was too low, reflecting specific issues linked with recruitment, guidance and provision for the first sixth form cohort. Nonetheless, achievement was broadly satisfactory, given the students' starting points.

The academy's analysis shows a clear grasp of where the notable successes are and what could or should be improved. Action has swiftly been taken to tackle the most serious areas of underperformance, for example by strengthening leadership and teaching in mathematics. The academy is uncompromising in setting challenging targets and makes very effective use of its rigorous tracking system to monitor students' progress against these and to inform intervention and support for students, individual teachers and subject areas. Senior leaders are confident that the academy will achieve its ambitious targets for 2008.

Personal development and well-being

Students are generally well behaved and have positive attitudes to learning. Behaviour was at least satisfactory and often good in the lessons observed. Students were attentive and compliant and sustained their concentration well, even when the pace of learning was pedestrian. They collaborated sensibly when provided with opportunities to work in pairs and small groups. Relationships with staff and with each other were generally good, and the most effective teaching is securely founded on positive relationships that enable teachers to hold very high expectations. The academy's stepped sanctions procedure is well understood by students, but it is not consistently applied by all staff and is therefore variable in its effectiveness.

Around the academy, students generally behaved sensibly and the high levels of staff supervision in corridors ensured that occasional incidence of boisterousness were quickly addressed. Students are friendly and are keen to talk about their academy, offering views, for example, on the improved extra-curricular opportunities that the academy offers them and the attention paid to encouraging them to adopt healthy lifestyles. Students generally respond positively to these opportunities. This is reflected in the academy's successful Healthy School award. The assembly observed during this inspection made a valuable contribution to reinforcing the academy's values and ethos, and contributed well to the spiritual development of students. The students appreciate the quality of resources provided, but the littering of the restaurant reflects a lack of respect for their environment. Sixth form students are appreciative of the academic support and guidance that they receive and particularly the wider opportunities that the academy has offered them.

During its first year the academy took a suitably firm line on discipline in order to establish clear expectations. The number of students subject to permanent exclusions has been high; 15 students in the year 2006 to 2007. This has reduced significantly so that there is only one such exclusion to date. The number of fixed term exclusions is also reducing, but remains high. A minority of students account for unacceptable behaviour. Senior leaders are alert to the reasons for this behaviour and are taking suitable action, but the impact is not yet fully secure.

Attendance is improving. To date, it stands at 90.5%, a rise of 2% on the figure for 2006 to 2007. The rate of unauthorised absence has fallen due to a rigorous and consistent application of procedures. The academy makes good use of other strategies to optimise attendance that include an accurate identification of the most persistent absentees and dedicated action to secure improvement. The academy reports an improvement in punctuality, but this remains a concern. The onsite Safer

School Partnership Officer makes an important contribution to this and is valued by staff and students as a member of the community.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning varies widely and is satisfactory overall. The academy has an accurate overview of the overall strengths and areas that need improving and the effectiveness of individual teachers. The sample observed on this visit reflected the academy's own evaluation that around half of lessons were good or better, with half satisfactory. Some teaching is outstanding in its effectiveness, and the academy has identified a small proportion that remains inadequate. The systematic programme of lesson observation has identified weaknesses in teaching. These have been addressed with suitable levels of support and, where necessary, with suitable robustness, so that the overall quality has strengthened since last year. In general, there are good relationships between adults and students, and there are well understood systems for behaviour management. This ensures that there is a settled climate for learning across the academy and that students come to lessons punctually and prepared to learn.

The best lessons were securely founded on careful planning that considered, in detail, what students with different abilities would achieve and how they would best learn. Sharply focused learning objectives were discussed with students in a meaningful way and skilful questioning was used to check and develop students' understanding. Well managed activities ensured students made rapid progress. In these lessons, learning was fun and students tried hard to meet teachers' high expectations of them. The most effective teachers are able to manage behaviour unobtrusively and motivate all students to work hard.

Although no unsatisfactory teaching was observed, too many lessons were satisfactory, rather than good. In the satisfactory sessions the learning objectives were sometimes unambitious, outcomes for different learners were undifferentiated and lacked challenge, and too little consideration was given to how the students would learn. In these lessons students relied too heavily on the teachers for information and spent undue time listening for information or watching presentations. Questioning that was untargeted or closed did too little to engage the students, many of whom were allowed to be passive participants. Students made progress because the teachers' presentations were well structured and their expositions were clear, but the quality of the new learning was limited and the pace of some lessons was rather pedestrian. Teaching assistants often worked well with students on a one to one basis, but they were not deployed effectively during whole class teaching.

Another significant area of inconsistency is in marking which varies in its frequency, usefulness and effectiveness. Too much marking is unrelated to the subject matter being taught. Often teachers do not identify specific strengths or improvements needed in students' work. Although students know and understand their targets, they do not always understand what they need to do to improve, either because they don't understand the teacher's comments or because insufficient guidance is given.

The academy needs to consider how it might strengthen assessment in lessons by replicating more widely the best practice that exists.

Senior staff understand the interrelationship between the curriculum that students experience and their achievement, and how providing the right 'pathways' is key to ensuring that all students' needs are met. The academy's business and enterprise specialism is used creatively. In Year 7, students experience a skills based curriculum for around a quarter of the time which they enjoy. In Years 8 and 9 students benefit from dedicated business and enterprise lessons. In the other year groups there are increasing opportunities, in a number of subjects as well as beyond the classroom, for students to develop their enterprise skills.

The curriculum in the sixth form is reasonably well matched to meet students' needs, aspirations and interests. The academy is keen to foster collaborative links with other providers to widen choice for students and to take account of the national 14 to 19 strategy. The sixth form, although small, offers students a wide range of options at different levels of accreditation. Results in the first set of AS levels reflect variations in the quality of sixth form provision. The academy is aware of the need to ensure that staff have relevant training opportunities for meeting the demands of sixth form teaching and has taken suitable steps to support the professional development needs of staff.

The wide range of extra-curricular activities makes a positive contribution to students' personal development and is valued by the students themselves.

Leadership and management

The principal provides clear strategic direction to the work and development of the academy. He has successfully established a positive climate, based soundly on the academy's ethos and values, and has raised the aspirations of staff and students. The principal is well supported by the senior leadership team. Although some senior leaders are more insightful and influential than others, as a team they work well because their complementary skills are astutely deployed to ensure the effective day to day management and good strategic leadership of the academy.

There are some notable strengths in middle leadership, although middle leaders vary in their experience and effectiveness. Importantly, the rigorous implementation of management systems, including procedures for line management, ensures that managers at all levels understand their responsibilities and are effectively held to account. Moreover, the academy has skilfully engaged all staff in the process of self-evaluation, so that individual areas for improvement are identified, everyone understands the contribution that they could and should make, and collective priorities are shaped for the whole academy.

The governing body is strong, supportive and proactive. The sponsor chairs the governing body and gives generously of his time and resources. Governors are keen to understand how they can best balance support and challenge and are developing good procedures for monitoring the academy's work.

Students are critical of some aspects of provision, but recognise that their views are counselled and speak warmly about the good relationships and the very good opportunities that the academy offers them. The academy recognises that standards remain too low, but its success in establishing a positive ethos and an aspirational culture demonstrate that it has laid a secure foundation for its further development. There is good capacity for improvement.

External support

The academy has useful links with a number of other organisations and has also retained productive links with the local authority. Support from Specialist Schools and Academies Trust has been particularly well received. Links with a wide range of business partners support well the development of the academies specialisms.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards, particularly in mathematics and ICT.
- Increase the impact of teaching on students' progress by increasing the proportion of good and outstanding lessons.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the DCSF.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools