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Mr Steve Allen
Principal
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Dear Mr Allen

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Grace Academy Coventry

Introduction

Following my visit with David Jones HMI to your academy on 25-26 November, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

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

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, senior staff, groups of students, members of the board of governors and local governing body including the chair of the Academy Board, who is the sponsor, and the executive principal for the three Grace Academies.

Context

Grace Academy is an 11-19 academy that serves the dynamic community of North East Coventry. The academy opened in September 2008 and plans to move into new buildings in the spring term of 2010. There are two other Grace Academies, one in Solihull and one in Darlaston. An Academy Board governs the three Grace Academies, with each academy also having a local governing body.

The current number of students on roll is 636, with a further 110 students attending the sixth form. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is more than

double the national average. The proportion of students identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is much higher than the national average but the number with a statement of special educational needs is lower.

The academy has experienced some difficulty in recruiting mathematics teachers. The turnover of staff has now settled and the academy is fully staffed.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

The 2009 Year 11 exam results secured across a wide range of academic indicators show a clear trend of improvement. The proportion of students obtaining five higher grades at GCSE, 81%, was a remarkable increase on the previous year's results. However, the percentage of students securing five higher grade passes including English and mathematics remained similar to the 2008 outcomes secured by the predecessor school. The academy did not exceed the National Challenge benchmark in 2009.

Students from minority ethnic backgrounds often do significantly better than their White British peers. The 2009 GCSE results secured by the girls were stronger than those obtained by the boys and the outcomes for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities show an overall improvement. Taking into account students' starting points and the 2009 exam results, the Academy has achieved outstanding value added scores which are likely to increase even further when all exam results are validated.

Post-16 results show a notable improvement from those secured by the predecessor school. Although in 2009 the number of students was small, almost half obtained an advanced level pass at the highest level. Results of the BTEC programmes, many developed within the academy's specialism of business and enterprise, were also positive with all students successful and nearly half of all of these students obtaining a distinction on their course. All students secured their first choice university place.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Attendance remains just below the national average but has improved from that recorded by the predecessor school. Data for the current term at 91.1%, although affected by notable levels of winter 'flu, is above the level of the equivalent period in the previous academic year. Unauthorised absence has decreased. Punctuality in the morning and between lessons is good.

The level of exclusion has declined significantly when compared with the 2008 data. The academy operates a zero tolerance protocol on unacceptable behaviour and effective systems are in place. During this inspection, HMI observed students in lessons, around the academy and in social settings; behaviour was good.

The results of the student questionnaire, completed very recently, show that more than 80% felt safe and happy in and around the academy; a similar proportion felt valued and cared for. The results of the parents' questionnaire completed at the same time were even more positive about the care and safety provided; over 80% of parents felt behaviour was good.

Sixth-form students contribute positively to the life of the academy in the mixed age tutorial groups and through their increasing participation in the 'college' structure.

The effectiveness of provision

The large majority of teaching observed during the inspection was of good or better quality. In three lessons, the quality of teaching was outstanding but, in contrast, in two lessons, it was inadequate. In all lessons, the working relationships between students and staff were good and often outstanding.

Teachers' lesson plans are detailed and identify learning objectives at different levels. In a number of lessons, students worked through the three objective levels when the more able could have started with work pitched at the highest level.

When teaching was good, lessons were delivered at a pace that ensured all students were quickly engaged with what they had to do and stayed on task throughout the lesson. Good teaching clearly identified what students had to learn in the lesson. In a few lessons, for example, teachers explained the criteria for achieving a pass, merit or distinction. When students knew exactly what they had to learn, their work was much more focused and they made good progress. Another feature of good teaching was the way teachers patiently asked students questions, taking students step by step through their learning.

Where teaching was satisfactory, not enough attention was given to pitch work to match students' abilities. Teaching was often well planned but did not take into account the gaps in students' knowledge or experience and so made learning difficult. A lack of pace was evident where teaching was only satisfactory. In most of these lessons, students worked on the same task. Teacher expectations as to what students needed to achieve by the end of the lesson were not always clearly articulated. Inadequate teaching lacked any focus on what learning was needed. Despite barely satisfactory and inadequate teaching, students' behaviour never deteriorated: this was a credit to their self-discipline.

Inspectors observed good examples of effective support given to some of the most vulnerable students. In the nurture room, for example, students' emotional, behavioural and learning needs were well known by staff and sensitive support and guidance was evidently helping them to grow in confidence.

Teachers' marking of students' work varies in quality. Where it is good, for example in some English books, it clearly comments on what the student has achieved and what they need to do to improve. In one business and enterprise lesson, students were seen making good use of the teacher's marking comments as they used them to improve their work and then evaluate it against clear criteria.

The academy's specialism is increasingly influencing the curriculum. The number of students taking BTEC, vocational and A level courses linked to the specialism has increased. As well as a range of business and enterprise courses for all students, there is a focus on developing business and enterprise competencies. Detailed planning outlines how these competencies, for example business awareness, communication and decision making, should be taught through a number of modules. In one English lesson observed, students were able to give examples of how they would use these competencies in their work. It was evident that teaching was more creatively planned when there was a focus on these competencies.

Much has been done to enrich the curriculum on offer for students. They benefit from a good range of extra-curricular activities and opportunities to go on overseas visits. During the inspection, Year 12 and 13 students were observed learning Japanese.

A limited number of sixth form lessons were available during this inspection but the quality of teaching was similar to that found in other year groups. Not all students enter advanced level courses with a secure level of prior knowledge and some staff have to work hard to compensate for the gaps in the students' understanding.

Post-16 courses are provided within the context of the North East Coventry Sixth Form Federation. The range of vocational and academic courses available on site is being developed.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The leadership team has demonstrated a determination to drive improvement and raise students' attainment. The 2009 results, whilst very pleasing in many ways, highlighted the need to be more effective in raising the quality of teaching and student attainment in mathematics and to a lesser degree in science. Concerted action has taken place to improve mathematics provision, including the appointment of a new head of faculty, additional staff, changes to the curriculum and one-to-one support for students. Scrutiny of provision and students' progress in mathematics has rightly become a focus for the work of the senior team.

There are clear lines of accountability for leaders and managers at all levels. The principal reports directly to the executive principal and governing board and is clearly held to account for the academy's performance. A vice principal or associate director is responsible for co-ordinating improvement plans for an area of the

academy's work, known as a 'strand'. The detailed academy maintenance development plan outlines the work to be done for each strand and clearly outlines measurable key performance targets which are used to hold senior leaders to account.

Each head of faculty is supported by a vice principal or associate director. This adds further levels of accountability and ensures that key targets are worked on. The support given to heads of departments is proportional to need.

Governance is provided by an Academy Board that oversees the three Grace Academies and the Local Governing Body which concentrates efforts on Grace Academy Coventry. Minutes of meetings of the Local Governing Body show evidence of robust discussions, for example, around student outcomes, the quality of teaching and the curriculum.

Senior leaders of the academy are confident that action taken is improving student outcomes and provision. There is good evidence that this is the case.

External support

The academy benefits from collaborative working with the two other Grace Academies. The school improvement partner reports in detail on the progress the academy is making and has identified the key areas in need for development. There is a local 14-19 federation which the academy is part of, and the principal a member of the planning team, which helps to widen the offer of courses available to students. Specialist Schools and Academies Trust has provided good sources of support and advised the academy of outstanding practice elsewhere. Finally, the academy continues to have good relations with the local authority and makes use of its advisory service.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Cook
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF [Paul.hann@dcf.gov.uk]