

PROTECT-INSPECTION

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Mrs Bal Pierpoint
Principal
Grace Academy
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Dear Mrs Pierpoint

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help you and your staff gave when I inspected your academy from 2 p.m. on Tuesday 1 December to 2 p.m. on 02 December 2009 and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Discussions with members of the leadership team and representatives of the governing body were very helpful in evaluating the progress the academy has made. I would also like to offer my thanks to the students who spoke to me during the inspection and particularly those who gave up their lunch time to meet with me.

As a result of the inspection on 26 and 27 November 2008, the academy was asked to raise standards so that more students are better prepared for later life and further study, increase the proportion of good and outstanding lessons in order to accelerated further students' progress and strengthen the personal development of the most challenging and disaffected students, including their behaviour, attitudes and attendance.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the academy has made

satisfactory progress in making improvements.

and

satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

Since the last inspection the academy has had significant staffing issues and recruitment of suitably qualified teachers has been very difficult, particularly in mathematics. Staffing is now more stable across the academy. The principal and vice principal have worked extremely hard to raise expectations, improve stability, and create a positive climate across the academy in difficult circumstances. Given the

context, the academy is currently receiving additional support from the Grace Foundation which provides specialist leadership support and expertise to sustain improvements.

The trend in students' attainment over the last three years has been uneven, but there have been significant gains and the academy has successfully increased the proportion of students achieving five or more A* to C grade passes overall. However, within this generally positive picture, results in mathematics have been disappointing. The academy has responded quickly and a detailed intervention plan has been implemented to raise attainment in mathematics and English. Preparation for tests and examinations has assumed a higher priority with some starting their exams as early as Year 9. Students are more aware of their targets and progress. Meetings are held regularly to review progress and to identify groups for intervention in mathematics and English.

The academy has made good progress in implementing a system that can more easily track students' progress over time in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. The principal with the new vice principal continues to simplify the previous system so that it is much more accessible for staff to use. The academy has a clear view of each student's starting point and their current levels. Managers are now in a position to be able to analyse the data as it comes in to see how well students are progressing. In this way the system is enabling the academy to spot where individuals or groups of students are not doing as well as they should. As a consequence students are more aware of what level they are working at and what they should achieve. This is often helpfully referred to in lessons.

The academy's assessment information indicates students in all year groups are making generally good progress during the year. However, the progress of more able students in lessons observed during the inspection is more variable and therefore satisfactory overall. In the best lessons, teachers' good subject knowledge and use of questioning helps to challenge students' thinking and move them on quickly in their learning. In these lessons, assessment information is used well to make sure lessons are planned to challenge all, including the most able, to achieve their best. This has a positive impact on engaging students' interest thus helping them to make better progress. In these lessons students show positive attitudes to learning and behave very well. As one student put it 'we are forced to think outside the box'.

Senior leaders take the lead role in conducting regular lesson observations. This pattern is complemented with drop-in sessions that focus on specific aspects of teaching and learning to identify where additional support is needed for students. These students are then given additional support through the academy's 'nurture group' programme which last for six weeks. Students find this support very helpful and say that because of this additional support their behaviour and attendance has improved considerably. They particularly appreciate the one-to-one support they receive from staff as well as older students who act as mentors. The academy has implemented a rolling programme of lead teachers from each curriculum area to

enable them to take a more proactive role in developing teaching and learning to ensure consistency and the sharing of good practice. A planned programme of monitoring is in place, although this does not yet fully involve middle leaders in contributing effectively to improvements.

Attendance and persistent absence have improved slightly but remain stubbornly below national average. The academy has developed a number of strategies to continue to pursue this through for example the appointment of an Education Welfare Officer. The extension of vocational education is engaging students in Key Stage 3, 4 and those in the sixth by providing them with relevant and practical approaches to their education. This contributes significantly to improving the personal development of the most challenging and disaffected students, including their behaviour and attitudes to learning. Consequently over 60% of the students in Year 13 went on to higher education in 2009.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Rashida Sharif
Her Majesty's Inspector