

Special measures: monitoring of Queen Elizabeth's Mercian School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on Wednesday 12 May 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, they observed 26 part lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, groups of students, the chair and a member of the Interim Executive Board (IEB), the National Challenge Adviser and a representative from the local authority.

Context

Shortly after the previous inspection the headteacher stood down from the post. The local authority arranged the appointment of an executive headteacher from January 2010, as part of a partnership with a successful school. The partnership includes the deployment of an assistant principal from the partnership school for three days a week and also that of another member of the leadership team for two days a week. The governing body has been replaced with an Interim Executive Board (IEB). This Board's first meeting took place in January 2010.

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

Students' achievement is improving from a low base because of decisive action being taken to raise standards. Performance data is being used to track students' progress and underachievement is clearly highlighted. The students currently in Year 11 are forecast to attain higher GCSE A* to C grades in English and mathematics than the previous year's cohort. The school has set a more challenging target of 43% to attain five or more GCSE A* to C grades including English and mathematics for 2010 compared to 2009. In around a third of the lessons observed during this inspection students' progress was judged to be good. This was because the students were purposefully engaged in their learning and suitable demands were made of their work. Students enjoyed challenges set for them and displayed positive attitudes to learning. In lessons where students made broadly satisfactory progress, the challenge of tasks was insufficiently high and the pace of learning was sedentary.

Other relevant student outcomes

Students' behaviour is good around the school and in lessons. Relationships between students are positive and they behave considerately towards their peers. In a few lessons, there was some restlessness because activities had not been planned carefully enough to meet students' needs. Attendance continues to be in line with the national average and shows an improving trend which is supported by good monitoring systems.



The school's music specialism continues to contribute well to students' sense of enjoyment. For example, they help to organise a music competition and participation rates are high, thereby impacting well on students' personal development. The local community of schools and members of the wider community also benefit from the school's music provision.

The effectiveness of provision

Since the last inspection, there has been a new approach to planning for teaching and learning across the school. Nine weeks ago, an approach to lesson planning called the accelerated learning cycle was adopted by all staff, resulting in teachers planning to a common format. This is leading to an improvement in learning. Students speak positively of the greater opportunities for involvement in their learning, and for example, group and independent learning and self-and peer-evaluation. However, sometimes teachers talk for too long so that students do not have the time to practise new skills and so become restless. A strength in many lessons is the starter 'connect' activities which revisit prior learning and stimulate interest in present learning. Although planning sometimes has a number of objectives to match the levels of ability of the students, an indication of the activities which will lead to the intended outcomes, is less evident. Indeed, differentiation is very often by outcome rather than through well structured activities. Consequently, work in lessons is inaccurately matched to students' different abilities. There is too much or too little challenge, which slows down progress. Although lesson planning details those students who find aspects of learning difficult or who have particular gifts and talents, the tasks do not always match their needs closely enough.

Teachers show good knowledge of their subjects. They regularly use questioning to extend learning. The best questioning was seen, for example, in English with a Year 11 group, where the teacher focused very specifically on the purposes of learning. Some excellent marking was seen, which gave students accurate pointers on what they had achieved and how to make further progress towards specific goals. However, the quality of marking is variable between subjects and lessons. In a small number of lessons, marking is irregular and cursory so that students are not guided sufficiently to help them move on in their learning. Students know their targets which have recently been reviewed and which they say are more challenging. They are increasingly a major focus in learning and are helping to secure students' progress, especially in Years 10 and 11.

Progress since the last inspection on the area for improvement:

- ensure that teaching is consistently satisfactory or better by making use of accurate assessments to set suitably challenging work for all students – satisfactory.



The effectiveness of leadership and management

The executive headteacher has brought renewed vigour and a keen sense of direction to the work of the school. This is a significant improvement since the last inspection. The senior leadership team are working closely with him and this is helping them to build their own capacity. Staff speak of a common purpose in raising standards and morale is high, reflecting their sense of ownership. Staff appreciate the clear vision shared by the executive headteacher and the management systems now in place. Lines of accountability are clear and good training for middle leaders is providing them with greater confidence in carrying out their responsibilities. The IEB is playing a vital role in focusing attention on the impact of the school's provision on students' outcomes. The results from a recent anonymous staff questionnaire show that the vast majority of staff feel that they are well led and managed.

The senior leadership team have introduced a data management system, which is effectively managed by the assistant headteacher from the partnership school. It provides good quality data about students' performance and information from analyses carried out by the assistant headteacher is used well to target students who are underachieving. Discussions during this inspection with students whose achievement had been identified as most in need of improvement showed that clear actions had been put in place to help improve their performance. These included a change of teaching group and individual tuition in response to the students' own identification of their learning needs. In each case, the students were happy with the accelerated progress that they felt had resulted from the school's actions.

In terms of the improvement to the evaluation of teaching, senior leadership team members have accessed training and support from the local authority which is helping to calibrate judgements about teaching quality. There is acceptance by middle leaders of their devolved responsibility for monitoring lessons. Although middle leaders, including subject leaders, have a greater understanding of their role in evaluating learning, this is a developing aspect. Presently, it is more focused on a scrutiny of students' work and teachers' planning. The regular data review meetings held with senior leadership team members mean that all middle managers are clearly aware of the strengths and weaknesses in the progress made by the students. Although managers feel far more empowered, they recognise that they need to develop the skills necessary to demonstrate a consistently rigorous monitoring of students' learning and to ensure that follow up action promotes effective improvement.

Safeguarding procedures meet the requirements and are securely in place. The child protection policy is currently being reviewed. An assembly for a group of students was seen during this inspection which highlighted the need for internet safety very powerfully.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:



- improve the quality of self-evaluation by carrying out more rigorous analysis of data to provide a clearer picture of students' progress in each subject and class– good
- improve the quality of self-evaluation by taking greater account of students' learning and progress when evaluating teaching –satisfactory
- take steps to ensure that all staff feel part of the school's drive for improvement – good.

External support

The local authority's action to organise the partnership arrangement and the exchange of expertise is making a significant impact. Nevertheless, much remains to be done to embed improvement if the ambitious target for the removal of special measures by the end of the autumn term 2010 is to be realised. The use of local authority consultants in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science is well targeted and appreciated by staff. The tasks identified in the local authority statement of action are being carried out suitably and monitoring arrangements are helping to evaluate the impact of its actions. The statement of action has been modified in the light of its evaluation by Ofsted. The statement now takes account of how parents and carers will be kept informed about the school's progress. A parents' forum group has been set up to help facilitate communication between parents and carers, the school and the local authority. The National Challenge Adviser's visits are suitably focused on key areas of improvement and subsequent reports provide useful feedback to the IEB and the local authority.