

Darwen Aldridge Community Academy

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	135580
Local Authority	Blackburn with Darwen
Inspection number	361301
Inspection dates	26–27 January 2011
Reporting inspector	Jane Jones HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Academy
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	854
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	133
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Rod Aldridge
Principal	Mr Brendan Loughran
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Sudell Road Darwen BB3 3HD
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Age group	11–19
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by three of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. They observed 39 lessons, taught by 39 teachers, including in the Personalised Learning Centre, made shorter visits to a further 13 lessons to look at specific aspects of provision, and visited some extra-curricular activities. Some of the lesson observations were conducted jointly with senior and middle leaders. Inspectors held meetings with senior and middle leaders, five groups of students, and the sponsor (who is also the Chair of the Governing Body). Inspectors observed the academy's work, and scrutinised assessment data, improvement plans, monitoring records, minutes of the governing body meetings, documentation about students' special education needs, curricular information and guidance, information about the academy's specialisms and partnerships. Inspectors received 74 questionnaires from parents and carers, 21 from staff, and 114 from a sample of students across the age range.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the academy's work, looking in detail at a number of key areas.

- How well do students achieve, particularly those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and the more able?
- Are students' personal development and the care, guidance and support that students receive good?
- How effectively does teaching challenge and support students of all ages and abilities and develop their independent and basic skills?
- How well does the curriculum meet students' needs and potential?
- Do leaders plan and drive improvement effectively?
- How much has the sixth form improved during the last year?

Information about the school

The academy opened in September 2008, housed in the buildings of the predecessor school, and started a new sixth form at the same time. It moved into new buildings close to the centre of town in September 2010 and opened the adjacent Personalised Learning Centre in January 2011. The academy's sponsor is Rod Aldridge OBE, chair of the Aldridge Foundation. Its curricular specialisms are entrepreneurship and sport.

The number of students on roll is growing but remains slightly smaller than average for a secondary school. An increasing proportion of students are making the academy their first choice of secondary school. Nearly 10% of students are of minority ethnic heritage. An average proportion, 20%, have special educational needs and/or disabilities and, of these, seven have a statement of special educational needs, which is fewer than average. The academy serves a community of diverse social and economic characteristics: 22% of the students are known to be eligible for free school meals, which is above the national average and the majority of sixth-form students receive the education maintenance allowance.

A monitoring inspection in relation to the academies initiative was carried out in March 2010. It raised some concerns about students' achievement, the quality of teaching, aspects of leadership and management, and the sixth form.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

3

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

3

Main findings

Darwen Aldridge Community Academy provides a satisfactory standard of education for its students. Its deep commitment to providing tailor-made care, guidance and support for students makes a significant difference to their personal development and life chances. The academy has forged many effective partnerships to support all students, but especially those who are vulnerable. The successful development of the curriculum has increased the breadth of students' educational experiences and raised outcomes. Students' behaviour is good. The characteristics of entrepreneurship are starting to become a hallmark of learning at the academy, while the sport specialism is aiding healthy lifestyles and enjoyment, as well as providing opportunities to contribute to the community, for instance as a sports leader or junior referee.

Achievement is satisfactory. The academy's second set of results of GCSE and equivalent examinations in 2010 saw a marked improvement on most measures and clear positive impact of the curriculum which provides students with a wide range of vocational and other qualifications from Year 9 onwards. All students gained at least one qualification, and 90% achieved at least five A* to C grades with 49% including English and mathematics. Students' progress improved in mathematics but was inadequate again in English. While the academy's focus on the grade C threshold has been successful, too few students reach the highest A*/A grades in most subjects. The academy's most recent assessment data and results of examinations already completed indicate that results are likely to rise again in 2011. The quality of learning and students' progress are currently satisfactory overall and improving. Students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress in lessons and over time.

At Key Stage 3 in 2010, teachers' assessments show an upward trend, most marked in English, in the proportion reaching the standard expected of 14-year-olds, Level 5. However, fewer students reached Level 6 in mathematics and science. In the sixth form, results of AS examinations in 2009 and 2010 were poor. Inappropriate advice and guidance meant that too many students embarked on AS courses without suitable GCSE qualifications. However, five of the students who completed A level in 2010 have gone to university and are the first of their families to do so. Information, advice and guidance for those currently in the sixth form are satisfactory.

The quality of teaching has improved since the monitoring visit in March 2010. Around a half is good and little is inadequate. Teachers' use of assessment is a weaker aspect of the teaching. Learning is strongest where activities are matched to students' individual needs and build on previous learning. In these lessons, students respond to teachers' high expectations and participate fully but, in others, while students often collaborate well, their passivity is reflected in a reluctance to contribute orally. This makes it difficult for teachers to check all students' understanding and hampers the development of reasoning

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skills. Other weaknesses in the teaching that impede better progress include a lack of challenge for the more able and insufficiently tailored support for students who have special educational needs in relation to their learning. Not all teachers are aware of these students' individual needs and targets. The development of students' basic skills, particularly literacy, is inconsistent despite having been a focus of training for staff last term.

The sponsor, who is also the Chair of the Governing Body, has a clear vision for the academy's future, focused on raising attainment and establishing the academy's role in the community. The quality of senior and middle leadership is satisfactory with examples of strong practice in some areas. Pastoral leadership is effective and underpins students' well-being and personal development. Under the Principal's leadership, systems for monitoring, evaluating and planning for improvement have strengthened and are satisfactory. Line management provides a suitable mechanism for holding staff to account: weaker performance is challenged, although shortcomings in the management of provision for students with special educational needs had not been identified. Students' academic progress is tracked rigorously against their targets, and data is used to inform a range of intervention strategies to maximise achievement. However, the ways in which the outcomes of monitoring and data collection are presented do not provide ready insight into the impact of actions taken, or enable emerging weaknesses or inconsistencies to be tackled quickly. Nevertheless, self-evaluation is broadly accurate and priorities for improvement identified. Coupled with the positive picture of improving outcomes and provision, this underpins the academy's satisfactory capacity for further improvement.

Up to 40% of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise attainment, particularly of the more able students, in the sixth form, and in English.
- Develop students' independence as learners by improving their basic skills, particularly literacy and oracy, and by increasing their readiness to be active participants in lessons.
- Adopt a systematic approach to improving the quality of teaching and use of assessment, ensuring inconsistencies are tackled and good practice shared.
- Improve the effectiveness of support for students who have special educational needs by clarifying what they are to achieve, ensuring teachers know and plan for their needs, checking stated support is provided, and involving parents and carers in drawing up and assessing students' progress against their targets.
- Build on improvements to strategic leadership by increasing the clarity with which the outcomes of monitoring activities and collation of assessment data are synthesised and interpreted to gauge the impact of actions taken, including at interim points, and to inform next steps.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

3

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Students' attainment on joining the academy is below average in most years, but close to average in Years 7 and 11. Learning and progress are satisfactory. By the end of Key Stage 4, students' achievement has been boosted by the wide range of courses available to them, including vocational options and qualifications, such as in finance, key skills and adult literacy and numeracy. Students studying BTEC science were more successful than their peers who took separate sciences at GCSE. Few students took modern languages at GCSE in the last two years. While the performance of subjects varies, the lack of high grades is a common feature. The academy's policy of students taking examinations 'when ready' may, in effect, be more focused on grade C than on maximising potential, although students do have opportunities to re-sit. There is little other variation in the achievement of different groups of students.

Attendance is improving and persistent absence reducing, with positive signs in the early days of use of the Personalised Learning Centre. Students enjoy taking on leadership roles, such as the lead student role. Students feel safe within the academy and speak of the continuing improvements in behaviour, particularly since moving to the new building: no student has been excluded since the academy opened. Students say there are only occasional instances of bullying and that the system of restorative justice works well. They show maturity when discussing ethical and moral issues, for instance, on employment rights. Although they know about avoiding risk and living healthy lives, they do not always choose to eat healthily.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	3
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	3
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	3
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

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How effective is the provision?

Teaching has improved during the last year: around a half is good or outstanding and little is inadequate. In the best lessons, teachers use their good subject knowledge to ask questions that check students' prior learning and probe their understanding, sometimes using follow-up questions to extend students' responses and deepen their learning. Positive relationships enabled unobtrusive management of behaviour. Planning sequenced learning, and drew on a variety of activities to engage students, including a good balance of group and independent work.

Where teaching is satisfactory rather than good, various shortcomings affect students' progress. Although teachers have detailed assessment information, not all students are sufficiently challenged by the activities. Rarely are resources modified to meet students' special educational needs, and the contribution of teaching assistants to learning is not clearly specified. In some lessons, teachers dominate the discussion and when they accept answers from volunteers only, other students remain passive. Teachers were inconsistent in the application of the academy's policy on literacy. Teachers' use of assessment varies in quality and is often the least well developed aspect of the better teaching. Learning objectives are frequently linked to different National Curriculum levels or GCSE grades, but activities are not similarly matched to different groups of students within a class and all often tackle the same work. Students who have special educational needs receive variable support in lessons: it is best where teachers and teaching assistants are clear what and how they should learn.

From its earliest days, the academy has sought to provide a curriculum that meets students' needs, improves outcomes and opens doors to further education, training and employment. Most students' families have little experience of further and higher education but this is beginning to change. A variety of courses and activities beyond the academy day is increasingly successful in involving students and their families.

Students receive good care, guidance and support overall. There are striking examples of students overcoming difficulties, developing high aspirations and making strides towards them. Communication between staff with different responsibilities in this area is coherent, and provides a complete picture of the student's progress with rapid follow-up if any slippage occurs. However, communication is not similarly effective for students who have special educational needs. Students who attend the Personalised Learning Centre benefit from skilful teaching and a nurturing environment. Guidance on option choices is provided at an individual level, and the curriculum shaped around the student as far as possible. There is more to do though to ensure students are equipped with good basic and independent learning skills.

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These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	3
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

The Chair of the Governing Body and the Principal, supported by a hard-working team of Vice and Assistant Principals, are focused effectively on seeking improvement. The vision for the academy's future is widely shared: morale among staff is good. Teachers, in discussion with inspectors, were reflective on their practice and interested in how they might improve. This augurs well for future work on improving teaching further, aided by the academy's sharper focus on learning and progress in lesson observations and other monitoring activities, such as scrutiny of students' work. Currently, the latter does not look closely at the depth of students' learning and coverage of the curriculum in the subject. Middle leaders are increasingly involved in monitoring and evaluating the work of their faculties. Line management meetings aid this process although records show that the question 'How do you know?' is not always answered.

Students' progress is tracked regularly against targets, which were revised this year but a few still lack challenge, particularly for the more able. The information is used to inform intervention strategies and grouping of students. It is also analysed to check on the progress of different groups of students to ensure no inequality is emerging. However, the wealth of data is not generally accompanied by insightful analysis that enables pertinent questions to be asked about the quality of provision. The academy does not routinely gather and analyse data on students' participation in the range of activities offered.

The quality of development planning has improved and is satisfactory. Progress against actions is rated as red, amber or green, but is not evaluated systematically in a user-friendly form to provide an overview of impact or check interim progress towards longer-term success criteria.

Governance is satisfactory. The governing body has an appropriate committee structure and includes a staff and a parent representative. It holds the academy to account, and provides keen challenge to senior and middle leaders. Statutory responsibilities are met. Arrangements for safeguarding are satisfactory: swift action was taken to rectify a weakness in the arrangements for sixth-form students who wish to leave the site at lunchtimes. Clear management structures for child protection and effective links with other agencies ensure potential harm to students is minimised.

The academy has a good understanding of its community and reaches out to other cultures and communities through the curriculum and programmes such as the 'Opening Eyes' project. Closer to home, the entrepreneurship and sport specialisms provide many opportunities that support community cohesion but formal planning and evaluation are at early stages.

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Students and staff are proud of the new buildings which provide a light and spacious working environment with modern resources. The academy is currently experiencing some staffing difficulties due to long-term absences of a few teachers. A large team of teaching assistants and other staff support students' learning and pastoral care. Given the satisfactory outcomes, the academy provides satisfactory value for money.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	3
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	3
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	3
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	3
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	3
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	3
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	3

Sixth form

The sixth form has improved on all fronts and is now satisfactory.

In its keenness to encourage students to join the sixth form, the academy provided inappropriate information, advice and guidance. Too many of the first two cohorts of students were not academically equipped to succeed on their chosen courses; for instance, over half did not have grade C in GCSE English and mathematics. Systems for checking students' progress and monitoring the quality of provision and outcomes were inadequate. Results of AS examinations in 2009 and 2010 were poor. This affected retention rates into Year 13 in both years.

Significant improvements have been made to information, advice and guidance, and to management structures and systems. Although students' attainment on entry to the sixth form is lower than in many schools, most students are making satisfactory progress on their chosen courses. Their progress and attainment is monitored closely and students who are working below their target grades are supported through individual learning plans. Many students who have weak basic skills also receive additional literacy and numeracy support. A programme to develop students' study skills has been introduced during tutor time: leaders recognise they will need to evaluate its effectiveness.

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Students are enjoying life in the sixth form, saying they 'like the freedom but with responsibility'. At present, they have fewer opportunities than younger students to contribute to the academy and local community. Students' attendance is similar to that in the rest of the academy but there is scope to improve punctuality at the start of the day. Students demonstrate sensible attitudes to their studies and well-being. Arrangements for lunchtime access to the site were tightened during the inspection.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. The small size of many classes leads to a tutorial-style lesson which aids one-to-one support but makes the development of a dynamic learning environment difficult. Professional development for the teachers of sixth-form courses has helped ensure that current provision is satisfactory. Leaders recognise that progression onto, and through, sixth-form courses is key to students' success and are working on new 14-19 curriculum plans. Recent improvements to overcome the inadequacies identified last March, coupled with accurate self-evaluation and increasingly robust monitoring activities provide the sixth form with satisfactory capacity to improve.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3

Views of parents and carers

The vast majority of parents and carers who completed the questionnaires were positive about the academy. Almost all are confident that the academy keeps their children safe. While the vast majority are happy with their child's experience at the academy, a few have some areas of concern. The most frequent of these is the way the academy deals with unacceptable behaviour. This was echoed in a small number of questionnaires completed by students and by staff. Inspectors observed no instances of inappropriate behaviour but recognise that the academy's effective strategies for promoting good behaviour are not without cause. Many students emphasised how much behaviour had improved since the academy opened in 2008 and particularly this year since it moved into the new building.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Darwen Aldridge Community Academy to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 74 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 854 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	21	28	48	65	2	3	3	4
The school keeps my child safe	22	30	50	68	2	3	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	33	45	38	51	3	4	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	26	35	42	57	6	8	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	21	28	50	68	1	1	1	1
The school helps me to support my child's learning	18	24	46	62	5	7	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	17	23	47	64	7	9	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	24	32	40	54	4	5	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	26	35	41	55	4	5	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	22	30	40	54	11	15	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	15	20	44	59	8	11	1	1
The school is led and managed effectively	25	34	46	62	0	0	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	30	41	41	55	1	1	1	1

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	59	35	3	3
Primary schools	9	44	39	7
Secondary schools	13	36	41	11
Sixth forms	15	39	43	3
Special schools	35	43	17	5
Pupil referral units	21	42	29	9
All schools	13	43	37	8

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



31 January 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Darwen Aldridge Community Academy, Darwen, BB3 3HD

On behalf of the team of inspectors, I would like to thank you for the friendly and courteous welcome you gave us. We enjoyed visiting your lessons and talking to you about your experiences of the academy.

Here are some of the things we liked best about your academy.

- You are enthusiastic about the opportunities you have at the academy, such as the many sports and entrepreneurship activities. You are keen to get involved in such things and take responsibility.
- You appreciate the course options you have in Years 9 to 11 and the sixth form.
- All Year 11 students in 2010 gained at least one qualification and 90% passed at least five GCSEs at grades A* to C. Staff told us that many of you currently in Years 9 to 11 have done well in the assessments you have taken already.
- You are rightly proud of your academy and its impressive new building. You told us that you feel safe and know who to talk to if you are worried. The academy is good at caring for you and helping you to get the most out of academy life.
- Your behaviour has improved and is good. You show consideration for others.

You are right that the academy has improved, especially during the last year, but some things could be better. We have asked the Principal, staff and governing body to do several things in particular.

- Help you reach higher levels and grades, especially grades A*/A, including on sixth-form courses.
- Make sure you have good skills in literacy, numeracy and speaking. You should try to take a more active part in lessons.
- Improve teaching and assessment so that more is good or outstanding.
- Improve the support provided for students who have special educational needs.
- Make leaders smarter at telling what is working well and what could be improved.

I wish you all success in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Jane Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector

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