

Tech City College

Reinspection monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This is the second follow up reinspection monitoring visit to Tech City College, formerly STEM Academy, following publication of the inspection report on 26 March 2015 which found the college to be inadequate overall.

Since the previous monitoring visit, the college has joined Aspirations Academies Trust, a multi-academy trust with schools and colleges in London, Banbury and Poole. The trust leadership took over management of the college on 15 September 2015, appointed a new Principal and board of governors and rebranded STEM Academy as Tech City College.

Prior to the appointment of the new leadership team, there had been little in the way of discernible improvement in the quality of provision for students at the college. Data for 2014/15 show an increase in the proportion of students successfully completing their qualifications, but from an extremely low base; sustained further improvement is still required. Students continued in 2014/15 to make insufficient progress from their starting points, and the proportion of students achieving grades A* to C in English and/or mathematics GCSE was inadequate. Too many students failed to attend lessons regularly.

The new leadership team have responded well to the urgent need to improve the quality of provision for students at the college. They have undertaken a thorough review of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and found it to be not good enough for the majority of teachers and students. Inspectors' observations support the key findings of this review. Leaders have reviewed and rewritten existing key policies and procedures and are implementing them rapidly. Leaders are rightly prioritising those areas for improvement that will have the greatest impact on improving students' learning and achievements in as short a timescale as possible. It is too soon to judge any improvements for current students and as a result, at the time of this monitoring visit, the progress made since the previous inspection remains far too slow, in particular with regard to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

Themes

Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Insufficient progress

Far too much teaching, learning and assessment is not good enough. A majority of teachers fail to set tasks that are sufficiently challenging. Too many lessons are characterised by poor planning by teachers. In these lessons, students are all working on the same tasks; some find these tasks too easy while others struggle to

keep up. As a result, most students do not fulfil their potential and fail to make the progress of which they are capable.

The majority of teachers are not sufficiently skilled at assessing how much students are learning during lessons or at monitoring and tracking how much progress students are making from their starting points. Feedback on marked work does not routinely give students sufficient detail on how they can improve their work next time. Most teachers do not develop students' abilities to think for themselves or to reflect on the progress that they are making and set themselves targets for improvement.

Leaders and managers have not ensured that students attend lessons regularly. Students' attendance continues to be unacceptably low in too many subjects. At the time of the monitoring visit, several teachers were absent due to illness. Managers' arrangements for ensuring that students still benefited from attending lessons were insufficient.

Teaching in a minority of lessons is good. For example, inspectors saw imaginative use of information and learning technology to stimulate students' interest in their work and a few teachers are highly skilled at using questioning to deepen students' understanding and develop students' thinking skills.

Following the full review just prior to this monitoring visit, college leaders have an accurate picture of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. They have already responded by implementing policies for staff to provide detailed and helpful feedback on students' work and to track students' progress more effectively, both in lessons and over time. Inspectors saw good examples of where teachers had already improved their practice. For example in a science lesson, following an assessed piece of work, students demonstrated a thorough understanding of what they needed to do to improve following the feedback given by the teacher. The teacher also used effective techniques to assess how much progress students were making during the lesson. However, managers have not yet ensured that all teachers have responded so positively.

Managers have planned several training events for teachers, focusing on those aspects of their practice that require rapid improvement. Managers plan to use the expertise that exists in outstanding schools in the Trust to share best practice. It is far too early to judge the extent to which the quality of teaching, learning and assessment will improve because of this training.

Improve the performance management of staff Significant progress

The new leadership team has responded rapidly and effectively to improving the performance management of staff at all levels. Within a short period, they have observed the lessons of all teachers. Teachers now have targets for improvement

directly related to those areas identified as requiring development. Training is in place to deliver these improvements. Leaders now have high expectations of all staff and, as a result, the large majority of teachers whose practice is particularly poor are leaving the college.

Leaders now hold all staff accountable for how well students are achieving. Senior managers have implemented regular meetings with teachers at which they are required to evaluate their own performance and the progress that their students are making. Consequently, all staff have challenging targets for improvement. Managers monitor progress towards achieving these targets carefully and intervene swiftly when required.

Improve students' opportunities to develop work-related skills

Reasonable progress

The new leadership team have introduced an innovative weekly 'leadership and enterprise' day for all students. Students who attend benefit from a range of stimulating and interesting opportunities. For example, guest speakers from prestigious local businesses talk to students about what it is like to work in their industries.

Companies provide internships and work placements that students find extremely worthwhile. Students undertake exciting project work with these companies. The focus of this initiative has currently been more on the creative and digital industries and, as a result, students aspiring to careers in mathematics and science gain less benefit. Students also use this time very effectively to develop the more general skills that they will require for future employment, such as writing curriculum vitae and becoming interview-ready. Managers do not ensure that all students attend these very useful events.

The proportion of students, particularly those on vocational courses, who benefit from formal work experience, still requires further improvement. Managers do not yet have a systematic approach to evaluating how worthwhile the work experience that students undertake is.

Improve support for students' individual needs

Insufficient progress

Despite a policy that all students should undertake initial assessments of their existing skills in English and mathematics, about one third of students have not done so. As a result, teachers are not able to plan to develop students' English and mathematical skills in their lessons.

Currently insufficient opportunities exist for students to meet with their teachers outside of formal lesson time to receive extra support if they require it. Over the

coming months, managers have plans to provide students with workshops for additional support and time to meet with their teachers if they require extra help.

Arrangements for identifying students who require specialist support while at the college are good. Senior managers ensure that all teachers are aware of the needs of individual students and give teachers useful strategies for supporting students, for example those with dyslexia or behavioural problems. Although teachers' planning makes good reference to the particular learning needs of students who require extra support during lessons, a few teachers do not pay sufficient attention to ensuring that these students are able to make good progress.

English and mathematics teachers provide good literacy and numeracy support to groups of students in lessons. However, the capacity for managers to utilise teaching assistants for more general support is limited.

Ensure that students are on suitable courses

Reasonable progress

Managers have ensured that there are suitable entry criteria for each course and that these are adhered to when students enrol. Students also receive a much-improved induction to the college that ensures they have a good understanding of what studying a particular subject will entail. Students benefit from the opportunity to study on a mixed programme of vocational and A-level courses where this is appropriate. The numbers of students having their learning disrupted by the need to change course are now very low.

Leaders have introduced a 'foundation year' for those students who require further time to complete their level 2 qualifications to a high enough standard to begin a level 3 course. As a result, the proportion of students leaving level 3 courses because they do not yet have the skills necessary to be successful has fallen to a very low level.

Until students take their examinations at the end of this academic year, it is not possible to judge the impact that these improvements will have on increasing the proportion of students successfully achieving their qualifications.

Improve the effectiveness of self-assessment

Reasonable progress

The access that managers have to timely and accurate data to measure key performance indicators has improved considerably since the previous monitoring visit and is now good. Staff at all levels use data well to monitor performance, to set achievable but challenging targets for improvement and to monitor progress.

The new leadership team recognises that the arrangements for self-assessment in the previous academic year were insufficiently evaluative. Managers and teachers had too little focus on the key reasons why students were not making enough

progress. Rather than spend valuable time revisiting this, the new leadership team has rightly decided to focus on the key priorities that they have identified. The improvement plan that they are implementing has ambitious targets with short-term milestones that will enable them to track progress and intervene swiftly where needed.

Staff at all levels demonstrate a good understanding of what needs to improve and how they will contribute to this. However, a small minority of teachers still focus too much on policies and procedures rather than any positive impact that these will have on students' learning and achievements.

Increase the capacity of the senior management team Reasonable progress

The new leadership team have ensured that senior managers have well-defined areas of responsibility and they hold them properly to account for their performance. All senior managers have ambitious targets for improvement, both in the achievements of the students for whom they are responsible and in their own effectiveness in their roles. Leaders have in place good plans to use the skills of managers in other schools and colleges in the Trust to enhance the existing skills of their own managers.

Management arrangements at subject level are less effective. The assistant principals now have good oversight of the performance of groups of subjects and manage their subject areas well, but they lack the expertise in many of the diverse subjects that they manage that would allow them to develop the most effective strategies for teaching, learning and assessment.

Ensure that students have an understanding of the diverse nature of the communities in which they live Reasonable progress

Since the previous monitoring visit, teachers have raised students' understanding of fundamental British values well through a series of interesting and stimulating whole-college activities in which students participate enthusiastically.

The behaviour of students around the college and in lessons is exemplary; it is very well managed by the large majority of staff who now have much higher expectations of how students should conduct themselves. Students demonstrate very high levels of respect for cultures, lifestyles and beliefs different to their own.

Students now have a good awareness of the dangers of radicalisation and extremism. Teachers have a thorough understanding of their responsibilities relating to government legislation on the prevention of young people becoming radicalised.

However, managers have not ensured that all teachers are sufficiently confident or skilled to cover aspects of fundamental British values as they arise in their lessons.

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